ISLET'S SCREW-PINE

M. Janaki Brahmavar

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[English translation of the Tulu Novel 'Kuḍuruḍa Keḍage']

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THE FRAGRANT 'ISLET'S SCREW - PINE'
A Panoramic Paradigm

I am extremely happy to express my hearty congratulations to Mrs. Janaki M. Brahmavara for the interest shown to bringout her Tulu novel 'Kuḍuruḍa Keḍage' (1994) in English. It is a creative and artistic approach of narration to represent the folk life and indigenous culture of Tulunaḍu. This Tulu novel has got the Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy Award for the same year.

This novel has got the credit of having the Text Book for the Final Year Kannada M.A. class of Mangalore University. The same novel has been translated into Konkani by Sri Melka Miyar and is being published in the Konkani Monthly 'AMCHO YUVAK 2003-2004' in the name 'Kuḍrya Bhithar'.

Mrs. Chandrakala Nandavara translated this Tulu novel into Kannada and it was being published in the Monthly 'Sri Sathya' from Mumbai as a serial novel 'Kuḍura Keḍage' during 1998-99. The same was published by Hemamshu Publications in the name of 'Yarige Yaruntu'. This novel is also won the Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy Book Award for the year 2000. It has the credit of having the Text Book for the First Year B.A. Optional Kannada of Mangalore University for the academic years 2002 to 2005.

Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy is very proud to publish this novel in the series of its publication. I take this opportunity to record my sincere thanks to the author for her kind permission to issue the book in this series of publication. I wish to express my thanks to Saujna Preetham, who designed a beautiful and meaningful cover page for the book. Thanks are also due to M/s. Honna Padma Printers for the neat and fine execution of printing work.

Mangalore
24. Nov. 2004

Dr. Vamana Nandavara
President
Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy

Foreword

"*Islet's Screwpine*" by M. Janaki, Brahmavar, is an English translation of her own award winning, Tulu novel, "Kudruda Kedage", published in 1994. In this novel, she reveals various aspects of rural life in an unassuming and forth right manner.

The novel begins with the arrival of Shankar to his native place from Mumbai, after completing his training in Indian Navy, with all enthusiasm and excitement to meet his dear and near ones. The story ends with his return journey to Mumbai with all tension and anxiety about Kusuma, who was kidnapped by a 'gang' from Mumbai.

It is through Shankar's view point, the author tries to unfurl various aspects relating to village life.. joys and sorrows of the people, their poverty, superstitious beliefs, passions, ignorance, moral and religious norms, social exploitation, the complexity of caste system, their inflinching faith in God, their bad habits like drinking and gambling, their hobbies etc. At the same time, the novel concentrates on the suppressed desires of women, the internal turmoil of the deppressed women. Woving the events meticulously, the author proved her ability in writing a novel without a particular story frame. Many anecdotes relating to ordinary lives of rural flock are used which could linger in reader's mind making them nostalgic of yesteryears of carefree childhood. The novel also deals with the relationship of a small islet in coastal Karnataka with that of a distant city, Mumbai.

While concentrating on the realistic aspects of life, the author ventures into the terrain of the prostitution. The miserable and pathetic life of poor, innocent, young ladies in the brothel was revealed through a dialogue of Pereira and Shankar.

There are frequent references of death, but the people accept it cooly, very much as a part of life. The innocent villagers believe the deceptive "Amnoor Plot" by the mentally retarded, Ganapa's brother-in - law. Most of them prostrate with fear and devotion at the feet of Ganapa, when he get possessed of "Amnoor", the benign and bountious Goddess, They carefully listen the 'Oracle of Amnoor' and feel solace too !

Though the narration is simple, the craftsmanship in utilising the language, the symbolic elements, the use of literary meaning with all its complexities is worthnoting. Effective proverbs, forceful and catching expressions added points and potency and depth to the theme. Varieties of human characters are analysed in a matter of fact style without any hysterics.

In her first novel itself M. Janaki Brahmavar proved her competancy in using Tulu language with all its potentiality. Depicting true 'Tulu life' she has showed a unique style in writing Tulu novels.

I hope this "ISLET'S SCREWPINE" also gets a wide range of readers.

I wish her good luck.

Dr. B.A. VIVEKA RAI
Vice Chancellor
"Hampi Kannada University"
Hampi.

Acknowledgements

My desire to translate the novel "Kuḍuruḍa Keḍage" to English has now come true. In this connection I am indebted to Karnataka Sahitya Academy for Publishing the same

My thanks are also due to -Dr. B.A. Viveka Rai

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-Sri Jaya Kumar and
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Jyosna Preetham and
Saujna Preetham

-the Management and staff of
S.M.S.P.U. College Brahmavar....

-Sri B. Praveera

I also thank Sri Prashanth Shetty (Honnapadma, Printers Udupi).

I hope this book will find vast range of readers.

Pavana
20-11-2004

- M. JANAKI BRAHMAVAR

It was late, almost midnight, when Shankar got out of the bus at Kallianpur. He looked around. Not a soul to be seen! A distant street light stood flickering, radiating a faint light.

What lay ahead? Three miles to go!

Walking with all the baggage did not seem cumbersome at all. But the very thought of doing so in darkness gave him a chill down his spine. He stopped for a while, thought, it is safer to wait till dawn, but moved on....

Neither thieves nor devils scared him! It was something different, - snakes!

"How stupid of me?" he repented. "How I wish I had taken a torch with me?"

Having completed his training at Naval Bases, Shankar was now returning home. His heart leapt to see his dear mother. He was also anxious to meet his childhood friend, Vasu.

He looked up at the starlit sky. Twinkling stars seemed the only hope he had. Instinctively he checked his leather bag and felt for his big naval shoes.

"These shoes are big and safe enough to drive those crawling creatures away". He mused.

"Snake Phobia is my only weakness. Will this fear haunt me till my last breath?"

The same fear brought back his childhood cricket to his mind. His cricket team consisted of Balu, Ranga, Dasu, Manja, Raghu, Monu, Vasu and others. Cricket bats were made up of stripped palm stem and the ball was a small, soft, rubber one which he purchased at the Parish feast of Milagres Church, Kallianpur.

... That was a dull and dry day in the month of May. The Match was between the teams captained by Balu and Ranga. Ranga's team was in the verge of losing the game.

"Yes", he remembered, 'Dasu was bowling to Manja, the last batsman.... out the ball went, beyond the erected low fence of Rama Rao's field, the presumed boundary, into the thicket near the Nagabana[1], behind 'Garodi'[2]. Balu ran after the ball....

Balu started screaming.. but why?...

Both the team members flashed to the Nagabana, confused.... Alas! something unexpected and unbelievable occured! The serpent had dug its fangs deep into Balu's right thigh!

Balu stood there shivering, soon he fell down, unconscious.. The frightened cricketiers yelled in chorus. That brought the elders working in the chilly fields to Nagabana. One of them tied a rope above the bleeding wound as first aid and they carried him to Maria D'Souza, the snake bite expert across the river.

The sun was fast setting.....

His friends were sitting at the river bank in the hope of welcoming Balu, the captain of the likely winning team. But inspite of the treatment rendered by Maria D'Souza, Balu died and was brought back as a corpse!

How sad! How shocking to see the body being carried from the boat!

"Balu is no more!" Everyone whispered. The whole gang experienced an aching void. It was inexpressible, beyond words... And none could escape from the dreaded punishment of being whipped either with a thin tamarind reed or cocount fronds, from their parents.

Shankar shuddered at the thought of Balu's agony. "My beloved friend's death marked the end of my childhood love, cricket." Grief surged within him.

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1. A grove reserved for installation of serpent idols and worship.
2. The shrine of the twin deities called Koti and Chennaya and certain other heroes who obtained divinities after death

"... Balu was such a sweet boy. He used to get small pieces of jaggery and distribute them equally among all his friends. Only then would he say, "comrades let us start"... He had all the merits of a good captain and hence was made the team leader of every game they played...

"Oh where has our captain gone? I really miss you Balu... I really do..."

Shankar was actually marching ahead in the darkness. The tap of his shoes was very reassuring. He kept recollecting the experiences in the Indian Navy. He seemed very eager to describe the Warship to his friend, Vasu.

He came up to the wooden bridge, the only means which connected his little village to the rest of the world. He could see a lamp burning in Naruva's house which was just beside the bridge. His wife must be counting the coins that the arrogant Naruva threw at her, after returning from his shop. He usually keeps his arrack shop till late night.

"Where could his daughter Malli be, who eloped with the bridge contractor? Did she ever return? Poor lady, her mother, had to bear Naruvanna's wrath on that fateful day, infront of the onlooking villagers. The whole gathering abused him at his back and teased Malli with a loose tongue but no one came forward to stop him from beating his wife. That day Shankar and his friends renamed this ruthless Naruvanna, as 'Naruvasura', a demon !

Shankar stepped on to the bridge. He felt it leaning towards the west. "This will definitely not last longer. How I wished, this was a little stronger?"

His native is a tiny stretch of land surrounded by river Suvarna. It is called 'Muudaikuduru', which, meant a small islet to the east. There is yet another one to the west, called 'Paddaikuduru'. Muudaikuduru village is cresent shaped. So some people call it as Modankuduru for fun. There are many such kudurus, because river Suvarna flows in many channels before joining the Arabian sea near 'Bengre'

At a distance, on the bridge, he saw a 'thuute', which kept swinging. That 'thuute', a torch made out of palm leave, kept blowing on and off.

As he came up to the 'thuute', he could recognise the figure. It was Aitha, Vasu's father.... Swarthy faced, bushy bearded Aitha gave one long startled look.

"I am Shankar, Niilakka's son, returning from Bombay. The bus broke down and hence delayed." Shanker spoke, looking at his tobacco stained teeth and unkempt hair.

Trying to figure out what the stranger was speaking, Aitha forgot to wag his 'thuute' which blew off completely. He tried rigorously to revive the flame, but in vain.

"Chath 'nasrani thuute', let the waterdog shit on your face" He raved and threw it into the river.

"Follow me." he said. "I shall guide you. I don't need a "thuute" to walk back. The path ahead is so familiar. This horrible bridge, the narrow bund of the fields.. I don't care at all. Don't worry. Let us walk fast, come on... you must be tired... Give me your bag.."

Aitha was ready to hold the heavy leather bag, but shankar denied. He had to trace his steps carefully.

Though Aitha had promised to lead him through, he kept staggering. Many pegs of alcohol must have gotten into his stomach. His plight exasperated Shankar.

"Why are you wandering about like this in the wee hours? Do you have any 'ajalu'[1]

"No, never. I am not worried about my 'ajalu'... Vasu, my son is nearing his death. My helplessness angers me. So I am tramping aimlessly."

Aitha melted into tears. Shankar was perplexed. But made

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1. 'ajalu' - service in shrines and other social ceremonies.

no attempt to console him. He subdued his curiosity about vasu's ailment, emphatically.

When they came upto the 'Garodi', Aitha fumbled. Shankar helped him to get up. There after Aitha was a millstone around Shankar's neck. So, he was totally annoyed with himself.

Aitha kept on babling to which Shankar gave a deaf ear. He was only concerned about Vasu and felt as if his leather bag had become heavier than ever!

The leather bag contained some things which, he knew were, dear to Vasu - Water proof boots, waist belts, shorts, shirts, hats and such other odds and ends. Though not new, Vasu would not reject, Shankar was sure of that. Vasu accepted everything that shankar presented. He imagined his friend with a smile and flushed look on his face.... But, now a strange feeling engulfed him, "All the items in the bag, would that all be worthless?"

Shankar. had learnt a lot during his training and had mastered so many life saving tricks. He wanted to share all the memorable moments with Vasu. He had a lot to tell about his new friends, particularly Pereira, a gentle and genial person without any evil or envy.

.... Life in the Indian Navy is educative, adventurous and full of fun, discipline and purpose. The limitless blue occean and the cordial people around, it feels so good!

Most of the people in my village are narrow minded. Even today there are some people who swear by caste, creed and disparity. Some live like frogs in the well, superstitious and selfish. Some pose as saviours....

Shankar had an intense desire for equality of all mankind. So he stuck on to Vasu and they were considered as hand and glove friends. He never thought of Vasu as an untouchable. Even as a boy, he had a view that the well off should care for the welfare of the weaker sections in the society. He was enthusiastic to bring about some social reforms. But he knew it was hard, just as swimming -upstream.

.... Nature is so beautiful and always stands as symbol of love and care. But look at men just the opposite!

Oh ! I must definitely pay a visit to my Nineth standard class teacher, Monthu Master, without whose, help and guidance it would be impossible for me to join the Indian Navy. I am greatly indebted to him. So I must offer him my sincere thanks...

Has he retired from service? Where does he stay? Vasu would know, no doubt...

But what has happened to Vasu?...

Shankar felt uneasy!....

On their way through the fields, he could smell burnt earth every where; the fields were being prepared for cultivation, during the onset of Monsoon.

Shankar reached home along with Aitha. His dog 'Kaalu' started barking. Niilakka came out with a lamp in her hand., saw a well built young man at her door, instantly she knew he was her son!

Shankar apologised for not informing about his arrival.

"So what? There is no need to inform. I knew I would see my son today. I have even prepared the fish curry of your choice for you."

"Oh," really!, a sort of telepathy, I think."

"Ya, Ya... Have your food first .... Aitha, go and get a plantain leaf. I will serve you too. Your daughter Appi has not cooked anything today. How can she cook? There is nothing to cook. She took some food for Vasu... Where did you go? You shouldn't be leaving Vasu.."

"No, No, Yes... I am not hungry, Please give me a small 'thuute'. I will go home."

His breathe reeked of alcohol. Niilakka dissonantly cursed those, who let him gulp such a lot of alcohol.

Aitha left the place with the burning 'thuute' in his hand,

held high. 'Kaḷu' ran behind him. Shankar was looking at the hostile darkness.

"Did he say anything about Vasu? Poor fellow has, been suffering a lot. He is in a critical condition. It must be 'nagadosha'. Hope he survives. Aitha is helpless. We must do something... But don't worry now. Have some food and go to bed, you must be tired.."

Shankar slept beside his mother at the paved portico and was listening to all that she had to say about the village in his absence. She spoke to her hearts content.

"The flood which came last year ravaged the whole village. How shall I discribe to you the plight of the villagers?". She said showing the chalkmark on the wall indicating the flood water level.

"The roof of our cowshed fell in but caused no injury to the cattle .. The bridge had also been damaged. By the grace of 'Bemmeru and Baiderlu[1]', it is safe enough."

"It is not safe; not at all. That wooden bridge will not last long. It would be better if we get another, a stronger concrete one built soon."

"A stronger concrete one! That will remain a dream for ever. Our Government would never take up any initiation. Most of the people have not yet been given the compensation for the damages sustained on account of the flood..."

"Didn't the Panchayut come to help the affected people?"

"Help ? Beyond expectation ! Our Panchayut is just dummy. Most of the people were evacuated by Walter D'Souza, Ahammad Saheb and Vasu, your friend. God bless them all."

Niilakka narrated how Vasu rescued Nemu and her children.

"The flood took away her hut. As Vasu was bringing them to

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1. Divine Powers worshipped in Garodi Shrine

our house, in the middle, near the river side coconut grove, his oar broke into two and Vasu fell off the boat. Had he left the boat it would have been carried by the current and capsized. But Vasu had the presence of mind to hold the boat in one hand and clung on to the coconut tree with the other hand, till Walter D'Souza rushed to help them all. Else they should have searched for the bodies of Nemu and her children near the estuary, at Bengare."

She went on and on. But Shankar kept thinking of Vasu. "Holidays without his company would be so boring", he worried.

..."Such a brave young man, Vasu! But now look at him! He is reduced to a bundle of bones! Who can predict God's will? Everything is in his hands. Nobody has an escape from fate.."

Shankar had been hearing these lines since childhood. Being a fatalist she must have accepted her widowhood as God's will! According to her belief, God puts human beings to test by giving them hardships. Misfortunes keep coming to you one after the other.

She blew the lamp off and went to sleep..

Just then 'Kaḷu' started barking aloud. A few people were walking behind a man with a petromax. Their shadows silhouetted on the walls.

"They are well known in our village. Experts in witcherry." said Niilakka.

Shankar counted the number of shadows. Five in total.

"They are coming from Baccha Salian's house. Do you remember Ganpa, the mentally retarded? Now a days people call him 'Amma' the Goddess! It has been a year now since he got possessed. He started speaking as if 'Amma' has gotten into him. Last month they even constructed a shrine for 'Amma'. People flock to her shrine, every saturday as a last resort for comfort and solace. The grief stricken people crave for 'Amma's oracle'

"Where there is belief, there is always relief. This piece of

Psychology is really magical. But how does the mentally retarded Ganpa make such oracular utterance?"

"Actually he does nothing. His brother-in-law is the man behind this 'Amma project'. Ganpa follows all his instructions. Every saturday, at noon, Ganpa takes purificatory bath and dresses up in a red garment. He applies vermilion paste to his chest and forehead. Then his brother-in-law, the so called votary, sprinkles the so called holy water on his head and face. Devotees then garland him and beat 'jagante' and 'bell' vigorously. Then slowly Ganpa staggers, sways, rolls his eyeballs in all the directions.

After three circumambulations to the shrine, Ganpa, the so called 'Amma', demands tender coconut and hits his forehead manytimes, as a show of valour and prowess. His legs begin to tremble and so his dishevelled hair. He shouts in a strange voice thrice. Then he enters the shrine and sits in front of the 'Gunda', the altar. Looking at the oil lamp lit at the 'Gunda' he mutters something absurd as a reply to the requests and complaints of the devotees, standing at the door. His brother-in-law, who acts as a mediator stands very close to 'Amma' and interprets the oracles, the devine message, elaborately.

Overwhelmed by his eloquence and commanding voice, the crowd surrender to him and consider him the lord's messenger. As a custom they also offer a lot of things at 'Amma's feet."

"Who is his brother-in-law? Have you seen him before?

"No, never. He just came with Janu, Ganpa's sister from Bombay. There is a rumour that Janu married this fellow soon after her husband died in an accident. The rumour also being that it was a cold blooded murder. What ever may be the fact, this fellow is full of guile. The possession and oracle both are a kind of drama. After the whole drama Ganpa falls unconscious. The so called mediator then amasses the money and things offered by the devotees. What a crook!

Recently he started brainwashing the people with his 'mata'

references and witch craft tactics. People fall at his feet and beg him to relieve them from all sufferings which they believe is the result of the black magic planned by some of their enemies. He and his disciples assure to help them.

I knew it all, this gang is a devil in itself, haunting our village. I heard they dig out some pieces of metal, a bundle of hair, a piece of bone, a coconut with some scripts written on it, a fresh lemon, a small packet of vermilion etc from one of the corners of the house. I have a strong intuition that it is those crooks who must have plant it then and there ..."

"Seems so interesting. I will definitely pay a visit to this 'Amma' of our 'Kuduru'... How did the people know that 'Amma' had selected Ganpa for all this?"

"It is that 'cheat' from Bombay who spread the word across the village. He has got a knack of mesmerising people and making them believe in whatever he bluffed. He has even learnt our Tulu language and now speaks fluently. Every Saturday he narrates Amma's story to those gullible fools, who listen to him with their mouths wide open.

It is said that in the month of May, on the New Moon day Ganpa was sitting alone quietly on the river bank. Suddenly a lady, clad in red sari, approached him, touched his head and said, "you are the Goddess - Amma."

Ganpa heard her voice thrice before she disappeared. He got scared and was running back to his house, but fell down unconscious in the middle of the outer yard. That is how that spot become a sacred one. So the shrine was built on that holy spot. People contributed generously to the"Amma's Gudi Fund".

After getting up from the holy spot, Ganpa did not seem normal. He behaved in a strange way and kept uttering, "I am Amma, the Goddess." He was unaware of the world, the people, food and himself. Janu's husband took him to Kerala and consulted the 'Mantravadi', who disclosed the meaning of "I am Amma, the Goddess." Since then, Ganpa, I mean, 'Amma' has

lot of devotees around her. Some people believe that Amma selected Ganpa of this village just to rescue the villagers from the natural calamities, such as flood, cyclon etc and also from 'mata' the witchcraft.

Foolish people cannot realise the fact that they are only catching the shadows."

"Mother don't you think our house is also haunted? Better consult 'Amma', Said Shankar, mockingly.

"What the hell are you talking? I am not enamoured of such things. We have no enemies, I am sure, nobody, not even 'Bobbarya'! Even if something is hidden in any corner of our house, I am not bothered. I won't consult Ganpa. As long as God is with us nobody can harm us. The Almighty will take care of us and smite our enemies who try to ruin us. In the end, only the good prevail, the rest perish.

It is not easy to fly from fate. Every ill man has his ill day."

Shankar was determined to let the cat out of the bag.

"But how?

Who could possibly help me?

Pereira was supposed to be the best detective. But here I think, Vasu would be the right person who could get rid of this sly dog from the village.

He too is sick, is serious...."

Shankar felt as if his heart was in his mouth, a sort of pain which he never had experienced before.

"What has happened to him?

I must see that he is out of danger and recovers soon. There are so many things undone, which has to be completed before leaving to Cochin.

I must get up very early tomorrow morning."

* * * * *

The moo-moo of her cattle, woke Niilakka. She was guilty for over sleeping. She went straight upto the cowshed and spread some hay infront of the tethered cattle.

"Wait, I will be back with prepared gruel for you, soon"

She went to the adjacent portion of the cowshed to warm rice water with bran. There she found 'Kaḷu' in his slumber at the fire place. After a strong thrust of abuse 'Kaḷu' got up from his dream world and reluctantly left the place.

She was sitting in front of the fire, just then she saw Aitha coming up to the front yard.

"Hope it is not anything bad about Vasu", she prayed as Aitha came near the cowshed . He seemed restless, putting his good old shawl from one shoulder to another. He stood silenty, looked as if he would not say anything.

Twitching her brows Niilakka looked at him. "What is wrong Aitha? Why are you here at this hour?"

"Akkeree[1]... I am... in need of fifty rupees Akkere, could you please ask your son immediately ... My soul is all grown over with sorrows..."

"Just wait for a while . He is sound a sleep. He must be tired . Poor fellow. Life in a big city is so difficulty, you know?"

'Kaḷu' kept on barking aloud, unconcerned of Shankar's difficult life in the city'. It was loud enough for anyone to hear from a distance of a mile!

Shankar woke up and came upto Aitha to ask what the matter was?

"Yesterday I went to Kunjottu" Aitha said in a feeble voice... "I went there to consult the soothsayer about my son's illness... He told me that , Vasu had broken some eggs of Naga[2].... To pacify Naga's revenge, we are supposed to conduct a ritual along

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1. A term used in addressing women honorifically.
2. Serpent

with feast, also give alms to a few Brahmins. He told me to get some money. I came to your door to borrow some money.... There is not a single ruppee in my house..."

Aitha sobbed for a while.

"Anneeree[1], please help me out... God alone brought you here to help us. I would not have thought of the ritual otherwise. From whom shall I get the money?..."

Shankar grinned at Aitha's belief, while Niilakka nodded her head contently.

"Give him the money. Let the ritual be held and Vasu come out of the bed. Naga's revenge over powers all the medicine."

Shankar gave him ten five rupee notes. He could see Aitha's face bloom. Aitha kept the brand new notes inside his 'kombar'[2]. He tied his shawl around the 'kombar'. Then folded his hands with gratitude and walked off.

Shankar was looking at his legs. The varicose veins caught his attention.

Aitha came back, just to say 'Thank you' and turned away. Again he came back for the same purpose. Third time he turned to Shankar with his folded hands to say, "I have two big cocks in my house. I will bring one of them to you tomorrow."

Shankar wanted to tell Aitha not to go to the Soothsayer. But Aitha left the place in a hurry and did not turn back.

- "I was so glad when I left for home. I dreamt of the good times that Vasu and I would have. ? But now... Alas!?"

He shuddered at the thought of Vasu for a reason unknown!.

"Oh! oh! oh! When did you come Shankar . Nice to see you after a long time, fully grown young man. Isn't it? I have brought large fishes... Kemberi, Kokkar.. etc. what would you like to have?"

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1. A term used in addressing men honorifically.
2. A large kind of cap made of the areca spathe

Thuṅga spoke loudly as she came upto Shankar. She seemed to be in a great hurry.

Niilakka was pleased to see her early in the morning with a variety of fresh fishes.

"What shall I give you today? There is scarcity of fishes these days in the river. That is why, you see, fish has become pretty costly."

"That is it, you people hike the price whenever you see a person from Bombay. Am I right Thuṅga?"

"You take it as a joke? How can you know the amount of labour that is put in catching these fresh water fishes? We wait with the fishing hook from night to dawn; in our small boat at the dangerous deep locations of the river. The anxiety and frustration involved in fishing is nothing to you at all ! No sleep, no talk.. But we are bound to do so. It is our 'fate'. ..... Now please tell me, what is your choice? You buy this a big Kemberi... costs fifteen rupees, but I will take only ten rupees from you, my friend, ... O.K? I caught this fish, just an hour ago.. Add a little more masala... Fried Kemberi tastes great. Shankar may not have eaten such tasty fish anywhere."

Shankar gave her the money.

"Oh... Swamii... help me in today's endeavour"

With her routine prayer, she kept it safely in a small cloth wallet, folded inside her sari, and then tucked it at her bosom.

"I know Niilakka's 'booṇi[1]' is good. So I came here straight away. It is getting late. I must leave."

"Will you help yourself with some betelnut ? "

"No. No time for that. I will come back in the afternoon to chat with you my friend. It is really getting delayed. I have to go

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1. ..... the first transaction of the day.

to Kallianpur. Hilda bayamma is waiting for me. I have to personally deliver the fishes to her before she leaves to Gurumata for Sunday's morning Mass."

Thunga lifted the fish basket and mounted it on her head, walked away briskly, swinging her hands, unmindful of the water dripping from the basket.

"Old lady, but Thuṅga is very active, When her fish basket is full she feels younger and more energetic!"

"How is her husband? Last time I saw him' he was already stooping. How could he go for fishing?"

"Oh! That poor fellow used to work in the 'maribale' in his younger days. It seems he had a disc prolapse. Now he can't sit up even for a short while. He accompanies his wife on her boat just for moral support. She fishes using a hook all by herself.

She is an exemplary model of a very determined and brave fisher woman. She pledged her 'Karimanisara', wedding chain, to buy a small boat and tried her luck with bait and hook. To her, Work is worship. God is great. He has supported her in this sincere endeavour. Thunga has been saving enough money to buy some gold ornaments.

"I think, her son is working somewhere in Bombay".

"Oh! ya... but he is an useless fellow, has become a destitute. He has never turned to his parents. There is a rumour that he lives with a Marati girl. He doesnot even write to them, you know?

As he is the only living heir of their six children, they pampered him till he was a big lad. Fate had a different story to tell. The much protected bird bore wings, took off, forgetting its family. What else could the poor dispaired souls do? The eternal wait frustrated them. Now a days they do not even mention his name. It is really heart breaking. Don't you think so?..

It is the bounden duty of everyone to take care of his or her

parents in their oldage. But, that, good for nothing son, shirks away from this responsibility. They have now accepted it as their fate. So they never chide their son for not being dutiful. But, he will repent one day or the other"

Niilakka back bit him crossly.

'Kalu' came upto them and started licking her legs.

"Oh! This dog is gone out of control. It won't allow me to dress the fish.. 'Kemberi' tastes good, but is very hard to dress!"

"We get, dressed fishes. in Bombay. The fisher-women there, are very bold. They carry knives and use it for their protection against eve teasers.

"That is really good. Women need to be daring these days."

Niilakka got busy with her routine that she has forgotten about breakfast. When she remembered she cursed her forgetfulness that was increasing day by day.

"Che! .... I should have given a cup of tea to my son"

She muttered looking up at the brightening sky.

* * * * *

Aitha was happy that money would do the miracle and save his son.. 'Vasu will soon be out of bed and take care of the family' - he thus consoled himself.

He reached Bhatta's house, but could find nobody there. He sat on the edge of the front yard of the house, near the hibiscus bush and duly waited for somebody to come out of the house. After a while, he let out a forced cough. No body responded. He assumed that 'Ayya' might be preoccupied with his morning pooja or japa. He patiently waited for another half an hour.

"Ayya... oh Ayya.." he called out.

Ayya's wife came to the threshold and said, "Ayya is not at

home. Some people from Theerthalli came early this morning. He had to go there to perform some important rituals in their house. He will be back only after a week."

"After a week? After seven days?!"

Aitha thought of his son's agony the previous night. He pictured the plight of his only son. He felt giddy and his vision blurred. He asked for some water, took it in his 'kombar', splashed on his face and drank it belly full.

He rushed straight to the nearby "Arrack shop" and sat at the corner where the people of his caste were supposed to sit and drink. He had nothing to worry about. He had fifty rupees with him. So he kept on ordering for more and more, until he totally forgot Vasu.

He was in the seventh heaven now ! He felt he was playing with the clouds. World seemed bountious, rich and colourful. Ailing Vasu and halfclad, starving Appi did not worry him any more.

He also munched a few 'pan beeda', smoked 'No.30. Beedies' one after another, enjoyed the smoke curling up in the air. - a total carfree man. He then boarded a local bus and his dream continued. He saw himself in a Maharaja's throne and enjoyed the dream infull. No worry.. NO hurry .. Nothing!

It is when he regained his consciousness, he walked out of the bus stop. He was walking in the darkness.

Distraught with grief, he suddenly remembered his daiva, 'Niicha', the protector. He went straight to the sacred place of Niicha, behind his house and prostrated in front of the sacred stone for a while. He told himself - "Naga or Bhattayya... are nothing in front of my daiva, the great 'Niicha'."

He mumbled while he prayed.

"Oh Lord, I trust you and bow to you. Only you can help Vasu recover. A helpless poor man like me can't afford any expensive rituals. Forgive me my Lord. I am only begging you, to

give my dear son a long life. If you wish, please take me in his stead.

You know very well that I never failed in my duty to offer oblations to you. My entire family showed you due respect and devotion. Even at this hour of need, I have spared the well built speckled cock to sacrifice at your feet. Please Lord.. help me, the helpless one, please."

Tears welled up in his eyes. He got up with some sort of contentment and courage. He rushed home to see Vasu.

But where is he?!!

Appi who was sitting alone informed him, that 'Tootada illu[1]' amma's son had come in the morning and had taken Vasu to Manipal hospital.

Aitha sensed the emptiness in his house. He just removed his 'kombar' from his head and treasured the remaining five rupee notes in a little hole at the wall.

Just then, the lamp got extingushed due to lack of oil. So he could not see the starved cat at the kitchen stove and emaciated Appi sleeping near the hearth in the kitchen.

Nevertheless he felt an unusual sadness engulfing him from within.

"Everything is Niicha's maaya[2]. He is the only powerful spirit who could protect my son"

He murmured and slept on the floor.

* * * * *

Isolated from all the other houses, Aitha's house was located at the Western corner of the village. Shankar used to be a regular visitor to this house in his boyhood. He was delighted to see the various colourful hibiscus flowers around the front yard

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1. Name of the house.
2. divine power.

and 'Ratha Pushpa' at the back yard which had over grown the roof of the house.

Aitha's family made it a point to keep their house as neat as possible. As soon as the Monsoon recedes, they clean whole of the outeryard. They plaster it with a layer of fine mud, cowdung and charcoal powder. There was a big jackfruit tree right at the middle. It had a shelter bed in the form of a square at the bottom of the trunk. Monthu Master, their landlord used to squat there, when he came to collect coconuts. So the family took care to keep the platform as neat and clean as possible.

But today the scene was different. Everything was at sixes and sevens! No clean yard, no blooming hibiscus. Shankar could see scattered leaves everywhere. A big 'dolu' (drum) was hanging from the roof. Two cocks were tied to different pegs on either side of the small veranda. Wooden troughs filled with water were placed infront of them. The floor was sodden wet and dirty. When the cocks stretched their wings out, dust swung up from all sides.

Appi was seen sitting at the threshold. Her hair was dry and rough without oil for weeks. Vasu lying at he corner of the house. He looked lifeless like a corpse! Shankar could not believe his eyes!

A young lady was sitting beside him, trying to make him drink some tea.

"Who is she?...

Is she Kamalakka's daughter Kusuma?"

Vasu looked up at Shankar. Though he recognised him, he was unable to smile! Shankar could see everything through Vasu's frail eyes. He seemed to be hovering between life and death!

"You can't die my friend. You must live whatever be the cost..." He thought

The seriousness of the situation brought him quickly to his

feet. In a flurried state, he rushed straight to his house to collect money he had in his bag. He called out, to his mother who was busy gathering cowdung in the cowshed and throwing it in the manure pit.

"Come to Vasu's house at once. Don't delay". He hurried back.

"What has happened to Vasu? Aitha is not at home. His relatives stay at Nejar. Sheena must have gone to sell his toddy..."

With all these thoughts and worries Niilakka ran to Vasu's house. But, there the scene was different !

Shankar was carrying Vasu in his arms. Kusuma and Appi were holding the boat. Guruva was trying to keep the boat as close to the bank as possible to help Shankar to get into the boat with Vasu. Niilakka was surprised. She wanted to tell her son not to take Vasu to the hospital. She was sure that Vasu's illness was due to naga revenge and was confident that the ritual which Aitha was supposed to arrange with the help of Bhattayya will help him recover. She was of the opinion that medical treatment is of no use... but sheer waste of money.

But, she couldnot mince her words. She knew, Shankar would only give a deaf ear to her advice. Nobody could stop him now.

"As the father, so the son", She murmured. Though she felt proud of her son, her heart was filled with pity for Vasu. Tears rolled out with sorrow.

Shankar was nervous as he reached K.M.C. Hospital. There, unexpectedly he came across Dr. Sripathi, his classmate in the Primary School.

"I was unable to bring my friend here earlier, I returned just last night from Bombay' He told apologetically and begged him to do whatever he could in order to save Vasu.

Dr. Sripathi assured him, "Don't worry, He will recover, Dr.

Shenoy is a specialist in such cases. He will definitely come forward to treat your friend?"

"Please save him."

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Dr. Shenoy was also of the opinion that Vasu would survive.

"It would have been better if he come earlier. But, is not late even now. It will take a little longer. The patient is too emaciated and was emotionally battered. We have to make him stronger both physically and mentally. At the same time we must boost up his confidence in my treatment."

Shankar breathed a sigh of relief and decided to spend all his savings on his friend. As the treatment continued Shankar could feel his purse become thinner and thinner. He was in need of more money.

He sat on a hard bench in the hospital corridor and kept thinking.

"Whom could I possibly borrow from? My mother may not have enough. She firmly believes in giving than receiving. Therefore she spends a good amount to help the poor people around...

Who else will help me?"

He remembered Pereira.

"Oh! yes.. Pereira definitely will help me. I shall write to him to send me some money immediately. He had promised to help me even during my stay at home.

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"Shankar you seem to have a good friend Vasu at your native place. But look at me. I have none in my village . The only one I had is now here at Bombay."

"Really? then why didn't you mention it to me earlier. I would love to meet him."

"No , No, I can't take you there."

Pereira was lost in his thoughts. He looked doleful.

"Why can't you take me there? What does he do? What is his good name?"

"She is a charming young lady, Sundari, But now she is a inmate in Kamaatipura brothel... a hell in Bombay."

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Shankar remembered Dr. Shenoy's words.

"Vasu must develop an urge to live. So we must encourage him to hope for the best.."

He walked upto Vasu's bed, sat close to him, touching his hand. Vasu lay awake, slowly moving his eyeballs, as dextrose drained into his vein.

Shankar could see the agony on his face. There were black scars all over the body. Eyes sullen and lifeless, hair tangled.

"... Oh! God. How strange ! The last time I left for Bombay Vasu accompained me till the bus station. Is he the same old vibrant Vasu? He used to look so different with his thick black hair, moustache, gleaming eyes and white glittering teeth. He could be then compared to an agile young bull. He is now reduced to a breathing corpse!"

Shankar recalled the conversation he had overheard between his grand father and Thanyajja, their neighbour.

-"The boy seems to hail from higher caste. He is too smart and intelligent to be called a sheduled tribe."

"Yes, his father, Aitha also is equally good. It is hard to find such a nice, gallant and active man in our own caste. If anyone shows me another such man in our village, I bet, I will definitely show a cat with twelve horns!"

"I agree. That is why Aitha preferred to stay here in our village while the people of his tribe stay at the woody hillocks, aloof from other dwellings. His sincerity and hard working nature has made his landlord have total confidence in him"

Thanyajja too was never short of praises for Aitha.

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Vasu's grip tightened. He tried to utter something. But nothing was heard. His lips quivered.

That's all ...

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The tedious journey from Bombay to Udupi, the sleepless nights, tension at the hospital, had taken a toll on Shankar. He desired for good sleep, but at about midnight he got up suddenly and could not get back to sleep. He simply tossing in his bed.

At the corner he could see a pair of glittering eyes. A cat jumped across the wall and caught a lizard. A thud was heard. Niilakka litup the lamp to see what the matter was. The black cat had knocked down one of the photographs on the wall. She fumed.

"This idiot has become unruly these days. I shall keep it starving for the next three days to bring it back to the right track... Luckily the glassframe is intact."

"Hunting is its birth right. No body can stop it from doing so"

"But it doesn't mean that it should damage our things in search of its prey."

"It is our responsibility to be careful about our things. Why, blame the poor creature...?"

"Alright : tomorrow you better fix up some strong nails on the wall. This is the only photo of your father. Let it be hanging there for ever."

She put off the lamp. In the stillness of the dark, both of them could hear the 'Kuru Kuru Kuru' sound at the corner. The black cat was too involved devouring its prey.

Some memories are just hard to forget.

Shankar thought of his departed father. He had heard so many things about him. Well built, good looking and very enthusiastic. He was a true farmer and a good tailor. 'Yakshagana' was his favourite hobby. He used to render 'artha' in 'taḷamaddoḷi'[1] His close friend was Kanthappa Master, the famous Yakshagana artist and the best preceptor.

As a boy Shankar wished to see his father in his dreams. He heard from his teacher that if you think of some one before you go to bed you would definitely dream about him. So, many a times he slept thinking of his father, but, his wishes never come true. That used to make him to sob..

He was just four, when this tragic incident occured. He believed it was tuberculosis that took away his father. He remembered how the incessant cough got worse day by day and how his father turned like a spike of corn!

He thought of the cute little things his father had made for him... paper boats, girigiṭi from the green palm leaves, whistle from the tender leaves of violet berry tree and 'a pair of ox' from palm branch etc.

One day his father insisted him to sit on his mat. He had a paper, that he felt, he must show to Shankar. Krishnayya Shetty, his friend had come that day with some fruits which were wrapped in the paper. There was a big picture of a steamer. He showed and named each and every part to Shankar.

"It is from these windows that we can see the vast blue sea. This one is the mast of the ship."

Shankar was thrilled to see the steamer. He remembered every part and repeated the names. His father was glad and gave him a tight hug.

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1. A kind of entertainment programme of Yakshagana performance.

"Did you ever see such a big boat?"

"Yes. I travelled in one of those. It was the time when we decided to build "Guru Narayana Bhajana Mandir" at Bannanje. We, the ten members of the 'Bajana Mandal" went to Bombay to collect funds from the people of our Billava community. We had to travel three days in the ship.. via Malpe, Karvar, Goa... Bombay was such a wonderful city! Lot of people around. There we took the local trains to commute from one place to another.

You must have seen the black coat in the 'Padasale' the main room in our house? Can you see the photo on the wall? He, my nephew Babanna gave them to me."

"The next time you get a chance to go, take me along with you. I want to see the ship, the train and the whole city. I too want to possess a black coat and my photo clicked."

He smiled but started coughing. He was so tired after bouts of coughing that he stretched himself on the mat. Shankar was keen on knowing more but he said to himself... "I will ask him when he gets up."

He ran outside and sat under the mango tree. He made a boat from the same paper that his father had given him. It turned out to be a big one but not so perfect like his father's. He placed it in a small tank near by. It floated. He put some leaves on the boat. It did not sink. He wanted to place some small pebbles. He picked one or two, just then, he saw at a distance his grandfather coming towards him with his umbrella tucked under his arm. He was elated and pranced. He knew for sure that his grandfather would bring 'golibaje', a delicious eatable from Ganiga's hotel at Kallianpur. He rushed to him with the paper boat in his hand.

* * * * *

His grandfather wanted to take Shankar with him. But Shankar was eager to know more about Bombay. At the same time he wanted a travel with his grandfather in the bus. He was in a dilemma.

His father called out to him and gave him an anna coin, touched his head gently and said, "Go with your 'Ajjer' my child and come tomorrow." Shankar looked into his father's eyes. Something unusual about it. Sorrowful and pitiable.

.....'Vasu had the same look of sorrow and pain!' Shankar compared.

'Is Vasu going to die?'

Shankar worried....

His thoughts wander back to his childhood again

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Shankar slept clinging to his granny. Just before dawn when she woke up suddenly and rushed to the front yard, he woke up too and followed her.

"..."Why is uncle Teja here, so early in the morning? What is the discussion going on between him and grand father?.."

Shankar went to their side. Grandfather held him tight and started crying.

"..'What was the matter ? I had never seen him cry before !"

"Annu, you put on your shirt- Let us go to Gundibayil."

So saying, he got up to get ready. Shankar had to put on his shirt immediately. If he delayed, he be left behind, that was for sure. Grandfather was very short tempered !

"..'Where is my shirt ? Whom shall I ask ?.. Both granny and aunty are crying out aloud ..'I wish I had never come here..."

Shankar began looking for his shirt. He went up to check in the clothes -line. No. It was no where there. He took out a whole lot of piled clothes and put them all on the floor. All he could find was granny's sari, sari skirts, aunty's saries and blouses, uncle's baniyan, lungi etc but not his shirt.

'Where is my shirt?.. that 'hadbe' , 'kali' shirt ? ... that monkey, donkey shirt?'

He imagined his grandfather with a furious look on his face.

'Where are you Shankar? come on fast...," said his grandfather and stepped down onto the front yard.

"This lazy boy will never improve even after his father's death. One should change atleast after ones father's death. Are you listening to me Shankar?"

Uncle shouted out to him.

Instinctively he went up to the place where he had been sleeping, looking for his shirt... oh ! there it was under his blanket.. white shirt with black checks ! He was extremely happy to wear it and ran after his grandfather.

When they reached the bus stop, by then, the first bus had already left. Teja uncle had returned in the same bus.

"God knows, how long we have to wait for the next one ?"

Grandfather sat under a tree with his hand under the chin looking blankly at the ground.

Shankar went up to him and asked,

"What is meant by father's death, 'Ajjere'?[1]

"Death means loss of breath. Your father's breath stopped for ever. That is all. "

Sad at heart he touched his grand son's head. He had a soft corner for the only son of his only daughter. He enjoyed to see him grow up. He also had a good opinion about his son-in-law, Dharmu.

"How good he was ! Really a friend in need to those in trouble, But now God has taken him away to his kingdom. God selects and snatches only the precious flowers from his garden...

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1. Grandfather

'How can I see my daughter as a widow? How can I console her?... "This weighed on his mind.

Trying to constrain himself he sat looking down.

"It is not good to disturb him when he is in deep thought. He will be furious", thought Shankar and walked upto the river bank.

It was low tide. He could see small crabs coming out from their small hideouts in the wet shallow sand bed. He threw some sand on the tiny crawling crabs. Instinctively they darted back and hid themselves. They came out again to bask in the morning Sun. Shankar continued his game and was amused to see the tiny crabs and their, in and out movements. This play went on for about twenty five minutes.

Pompoie... Pompoie... the bus !

"Bus is near the 'Maarigudi'[1], Annu, come, let us go."

Shankar came running.

In the bus his mind went on racing. My father is not breathing. That is all. He will definitely tell me about the big city, Bombay, about the ship and train. Today I will ask him many more questions like "How big the ship is ? How long is the train?. As soon as we reach there I should ask. "When he is taking me to Bombay?"

After a long ride, they reached home. The scene that lay infront of Shankar was totally different. His father was made to sleep in the middle of the 'Chavadi'. Oiled cotton wicks were burning in broken coconut shells at both head and feet end. The fragrance and smoke of Agarbathi was overwhelming. He had covered himself with a white cloth. His face appeared clean and clear. No worry, no pain, no tears and most important no incessant cough !

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1. Shrine of village goddess of epidemies.

A lot of the neighbour hood had gathered in front of the house. But no body seemed to be in a good mood. There was silence every where !

"Why so ? ...

Where is my mother ? ..."

Shankar searched for her wherever likely.. verandah, bath-room, cowshed and kitchen... She was sitting in a corner near the kitchen ladder ! Something is wrong somewhere ! Her sari, her hair, all not in shape !

"Oh! God! What is wrong with my mother ? What is the matter ?"

She reminded him of Puttakka, the lady who gets possessed on every 'Saṅkraanti[1] day'. But there used to be some people holding her then. Some comfort her by fanning her, others offer tender coconut and so on ...

'Here is no body to help my mother. I will have to call my grandfather...'

He was going to dart out but then grandfather himself came in looking for his daughter. He consoled her softly but she held Shankar and cried out aloud. Shankar was cross at her and pulled himself out of her grip and ran outside.

He saw some strangers cutting the branches of a near by mango tree, while others preparing a wooden pyre in their forty cents field at the back side of the house.

'Thath, I should have stayed there at Muudaikuduru. Why the hell did I come here?.

How it is possible for me to stay there? Granny aunty, uncle all are here !..."

Everything was beyond Shankar's comprehension. He went up to his father and held his finger near his nose.. Yes, of course

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1. The passage of the sun from one sign of the Zodiac to another

he is not breathing. His face is cool ! That's good! No cough ! No pain !

He ran behind the house. There were so many papers, big enough to make boats. Those were the papers that were used to wrap the white clothes, which his relatives had brought to cover the dead body, as a ritual.

Shankar started collecting all the papers. Just then, Krishnayya Shetty came there and threw one more big paper , smelling of sandalwood. 'Oh! sandalwood. It is so nice ! Shankar loved the smell and made a bigger boat with it. All together he had made twenty one of them. He collected them all and kept them under the thatch of their cowshed.

He got busy soon after that. He was made to apply oil, yellow powder, powder of soapnut and soap on his father's body. He stepped back and was horrified to see his father in the supine position without any movement at all. But he could not run away as his grandfather was standing just there and was watching over the proccedings.

After the bath, they kept the body on a single large plantain leaf, carried inside and dressed the body with a new shirt, a new 'dhoti' and a new turban. Shankar was pleased to see his father being garlanded with jasmine and sandalwood.

But his mother wept uncontrollably. She broke her bangles and hurt herself ! Her face appeared blank and unkempt without the earrings and nose stud. She had also taken off her wedding chain from her neck. Her forehead had no trace of the vermilion, the mark of a married woman.

..."Why is she acting so unruly today? Why can't she just shut up ? Some kind of spirit or ghost must have gotten into her! How strange ! No body is trying to help her get that out of her !... All of them here seem to be just watching her plight..."

Shankar made a low growling sound.

What followed next was unbearable. His father's body was

laid on the wooden pyre. He was asked to sprinkle some water into his father's mouth, using the 'tulasi twigs'. His father did not swallow it but it trickled down along the side of his mouth. He was then asked to go round the pyre. Bhajans were sung by the members of the `Guru narayana Bhajana Mandir'..

"Yaarige yaaruntu yaravina samsaara...

Niira melaṇa guḷḷe nijavalla Hariye..."

a Kannada Kiirthan composed by Purandara daasa.

Shankar was the key person to the whole procedure. The 'Gurkar', the head of the caste and the washerman of the village who was the conventional guide to the funeral were standing near his grandfather. Teja uncle helped Shankar to light the pyre. He did it methodically, lest, he thought, his grandfather should shout at him. He could even stop him in the midst, no matter, how many onlookers were present around.

Shankar saw the spewing flames !

'Oh ! No ! My father is burning inside !"

He was about to scream but controlled himself. He was tired of listening all that to since morning. He was giddy and nauseated .."But why ? why ? ...."

He went straight behind the hut and wept silently. Suddenly he remembered the paper boat, he had made just the day before.. 'Oh God ! where did I keep that boat ? ..."

He ran to the 'Padsale' and groped his father's coat., which was hanging on the big nail on the wall. He found the paper boat in the coat pocket. How happy he was ! He took it to the hut where he had kept the other boats. He counted. Altogether there were twenty two! He kept them all in the coat pocket and played with the coat, swinging it one.. two .. three.. four.... His father had taught him to count till fifty. Thus he counted many fifties. He had a strange feeling that his father was around him in the 'Padsale'

He had never imagined that his father's death would bring so much of difference in his life !

There were quite a lot of ceremonies at home in connection with the cremation. The thirteenth day ceremony was called 'bojja'. Shankar was considered the key person in all these events. He participated with utmost care and concern and tried his best to avoid the wrath of his grandfather.

Exactly at noon on the day of the 'bojja', a ritual of serving vegetarian meal to the departed soul was held at the cremation ground. Shankar carried the food on his head. The food was offered. All the menfolk waited for the crows to come and devour the food. When the crowing of the crows was heard all of them were satisfied... The ritual was finally over. Then followed a grand meal for relatives and friends.

On the same night there was another ceremony called 'madebojja'. The family performed a ritual through which the soul was invoked into the house. This was again followed by a sumptuous dinner, nonvegetarian this time.

Soon after that an old lady, a widow, applied some oil on his mother's hair and combed her hair. She forced his mother to wear a new sari. Then some more old widows accompanied her to the bus stop.

Shankar was already present there with his grandfather. He was holding a big paper packet that Teja uncle gave him without grumbling. He was contented because that packet contained his father's black coat and twenty two paper boats in its pocket.

According to the matriarchal system of inheritence, for Shankar and his mother, that meant the termination of all the relationship with his father's house. But Shankar was unaware of the fact. Ignorance was a bliss !

".... My grandfather was really great. He looked after me very well...."

.... He was well built and was conspicuous even in a big crowd, his moustache being his pride. His commanding voice and majestic walk was worth admiring. But if he got furious he was a real nightmare !...

Being a coconut merchant he worked really hard. Shankar loved to accompany him on his long business trips on his boat, laden with coconuts upto Madi and then to Perdoor on a bullock cart. On the day of 'Sankranthi' the devotees swarmed the temple square at Perdoor. The demand for coconuts here was more than any other place. So he invariably carried a loadful to such a distant place, on that particular day every month. He was contented with the day's earning but used to be very tired on his return journey. Shankar was delighted to help him row the boat downstream the river Suvarna.

He took a great care to keep his boat in good shape. He had also built a shed for the boat to protect it from rain.

..That day he hired some labourers to get the boat from the river to the shed, using coconut tree logs as rollers. Shankar was thrilled to see the movement of the boat on the rollers and jumped on it. Within no time he had to return to his mother, as grandfather whacked him on his back. She looked at him angrily but applied coconut oil on the rashes. He had thought that his mother would reprimand her father but instead, she yelled at him.

"Don't behave like a nut. Do you know how strenuous it is to bring that big boat above the river? You are just impossible and pig headed !..."

Shankar was crest fallen. He ran to Vasu's house and did not return till dusk. Grandfather was anxious, so he came to pacify and take Shankar home.

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Just then, Shankar heard the kokokoo of a cock from a near by tree branch. As it stopped another cock in the neigh-

bour hood crowed. That was from Thanyajja's house. The next crowing was heard from Narsi akka's house. The other one came from Sheenanna's area. Aitha's cocks crowed at the far end and so on .....

Being an apt listener he loved to hear the various heroic, rythmic voice of the cocks. He felt the cocks were answering each other's calls.

Slowly he fell asleep and had a dream

-Vasu was discharged from the hospital. Both of them returning home. On the way, Shankar said to Vasu, "People say there are two 'births'.. That is true in your case..."

Vasu simply smiled- a broad and healthy smile. They stood on the middle of the wooden bridge. There was high tide in the river. The conversation continued for a long time.

"Vasu look there! a big fish 'Mullet' jumped out of water. It likes to breathe fresh air."

"No. No. It wished to die."

"Don't think that death comes as and when we desire. Dying is not so easy."

"It is not so difficult either."

Alas ! Vasu leaned against the bridge. Why?

Shankar held him tight but in vain. Vasu fell down.

"Please help me. Vasu has to be saved ..."

No response, but he could see some one coming from the northern end of the bridge.

"Who is that ? Is it Kamalakka's daughter, Kusuma ?"

.....

.....

Shankar got up with a start. He was nervous. He was palpitating.

"It is already dawn. Oh God ! I was supposed to reach the hospital well before dawn. Vasu is alone. He needs care and attention ?"

He checked his pocket. All the Five rupee Notes he had were new but only a few.

'This will definitely not be enough. I must write to Pereira.'

Niilakka gave him tea. He gulped it down.

When he was just about to climb the bridge, he saw Kusuma waiting for him. She gave him a small paper bundle and asked about Vasu's health.

"There is nothing to worry. He will recover. But it will definitely take some time."

Kusuma went back. Her face told him that she was worried about Vasu. He opened the old paper piece and found some crumpled Notes... altogether Rs. hundred !

A clap was heard from behind. He saw Aitha running towards him.

"Che ..... in a hurry, I forgot to tell him to accompany me."

.....

.....

They met Dr. Shenoy at the hospital corridor. He looked at Aitha compassionately and accompanied them to the ward. Vasu was there on the bed lying lifeless, covered from head to toe with white linen.

Dr. Shenoy hesitated, but Aitha understood and started sobbing bitterly..

"What can we human's do ? It is all in God's hand."

Dr. Shenoy tried to console Aitha, but he continued wailing.

Holding Aitha's hand Shankar glanced at the Doctor's apron. A name plate was attached to it which told him that Dr. Shenoy

had three medical degrees. Yet, the Doctor very well knew that the knowledge gained by the medical science couldn't in anyway help to console a father, standing at the death bed of his son. So he talked like a Philosopher forgetting himself as a Doctor.

"..... 'Dr. Shenoy strives hard to save lives. His profession is considered noble.' ...."

Shankar compared the Doctor's job with his own in Indian Navy... waiting to wipe out enemies, ... a very grotesque job.

.... "My classmates, sons of our Headmaster, Sripathi and Sridhar had also become doctors. I had excelled in studies too and wished to join the medical profession. But there was nobody to encourage and support me. My father died young. My grandfather had no idea of medical profession. Uncle? Good for nothing. I was like a fly in his eye to him right from the beginning'... ...."

Aitha was shrivelling from sorrow. Vasu's corpse was waiting to be attended...

Shankar thought, it was stupid on his part to think of unnecessary things and got back to work. He got all the help he needed from Dr. Shenoy and Dr. Sripathi.

As the ambulance was about to leave he folded his hands in gratitude.

Dr. Shenoy remarked, "His condition was not a serious one. He got infected from the filthy, polluted water of the age old pond. The diagnosis and medicine failed because the patient had lost all hopes. and silently waited for death."

On the way back Shankar kept thinking.

".. Had I come earlier, I would have instilled a desire in him to live. But now it is all over. It was a great loss." he sensed the pain.

'I could not become a doctor but atleast I am serving my Mother India. Our Naval service is inevitable during emergency. We struggled so much when the cyclone plundered the eastern

coast ! With might and main we worked day and night to save as many people as possible. We the Naval cadets transported the victims to the hospital. Only then could the doctors do something. The cadets fulfill their duties, what ever be it . We help the helpless during natural calamities. So there is nothing to regret. I gave myself to the service of the nation...'

He thus consoled himself.

".. But ... poor Vasu.. look at his fate.. !"

He recalled the memories of their childhood bondage, just to shun the fresh bitter ones.

Vasu had lost his mother. She died while giving birth to his sister. Vasu, a boy had to look after the baby, his only sister Appi.

Later when Aitha took to drinking, they barely had a square meal. The utter poverty haunted him through out his boyhood.

Niilakka had advised her son to keep away from Vasu, the untouchable. But he gave a deaf ear to her. He went to the untouchable's house everyday. They played together. The word called 'caste' meant nothing at all to them.

Shankar liked to play with the 'tala', the cymbal, while Vasu beat the big and heavy 'dolu', the drum. Vasu did all the possible things to keep his friend happy through out his stay in his house. They shared cashew nuts, jackfruit, roasted jackfruit seeds. They stole mangoes from the neighbouring compound. Vasu used to give him boiled eggs to eat. They played so many games - Kutti-donne, Picchi-palle etc. Some times they even chased a small tortoise in the pool.

Life seemed so interesting and adventurous. Vasu and Shankar used to hide behind the Bobbarya Kotye'[1], the God of the sea, and scare the passers by with an unusual loud sound 'buk'.

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1. The shrine of Bobbarya Bhuta.

They never were even once guilty of this kind of amusement, though they were frequently fired & abused by the people. Enjoyment was they seeked for.

"Aitha, let Vasu come to my school. He too wishes to learn."

"That is fine. But, where shall he sit?"

"There are eight benches in our class. We both shall sit together."

"Do you think it is possible?"

"Why not ? It is possible, 'maraya'..."

"People will kick him out. Don't worry. He too will learn. I am teaching him to play the 'dolu'. He has to continue my 'Ajal'. School education is not meant for down trodden like us .... "

Aitha remained silent but sighed heavily.

Vasu stayed away from school. But Shankar taught him all that he learnt. Vasu was eager to write the alphabets on Shankar's slate. He learnt the rhymes and both of them sung it hand in hand.

Niilakka did all she could, to stop his frequent visit to Aitha's house, but all in vain !

"Like father, like son" she told herself and wiped off her tears. The memory of her husband always made her feel the blankness of her widowhood.

Vasu was very fond of a Kannada song. He used to sing it sometimes even to put his sister sleep. That was the song of 'Punnyakoti' .... A narrative song about the overwhelming virtues of a cow,..

.....

"Thabbaliyu niinade magane

Hebbuliya bayannu hoguvenu.

ibbaraaruṇa thiiritenḍu

Tabbi kondithu kandana. .....

["I have to return to the tiger, I must keep my promise. You'll be an orphan my dear." So saying she embraced the calf for one last time.]

.....

.....

Shankar and Vasu kept repeating the song without actually knowing the real meaning of 'thabbali' Shankar himself was an orphan (thabbali) because his father had died. Vasu, because he was without his mother. But they were unaware of that...

.....

Vasu having died today, who can be considered the real orphan ? Is it Appi ? Aitha ? or Shankar himself ?...

* * * * *

The ambulance could carry the corpse only till the edge of the bridge. The honking of the ambulance attracted a lot of people to it. But Aitha's relatives were unaware of Vasu's death. They were residing at Nejar, far off from Aitha's neighbourhood.

"Who will carry the corpse ? "

"How long will it lie in the scorching sun ?"

These were the questions haunting Shankar.

"Can anyone lend me a helping hand?"

He pleaded with the crowd.

"How can the higher caste, touch the corpse of the untouchable. Have lost all your senses ?" They growled.

"Hell with your caste." Shankar retorted.

"Do you know what happens when a calamity strikes ? Then you don't see if the victim is rich or poor, an untouchable or not. You must save as many lives as possible, that's more important. Do you understand."

The crowd deserted the area, mumbling to themselves !

Aitha stood like a statue holding his hands on his head.

shankar was determined. He shut his eyes and compressed his lips for a few moments and then turned to Aitha with red rimmed eyes and said,

"Come on, hold the legs and move fast"

He lifted the corpse at the head end.

It was not the time to worry or oppose. Therefore, Aitha followed his instructions silently. The agony was inexplicable. He could neither hold back the tears nor wipe them out. It rolled down his cheeks all the way !

While stepping down the bridge, Shankar happened to look into the direction of Kamalakka's house. He could see and recognise a familiar face through the small kitchen window. She was Kusuma, Kamalakka's daughter !

Shankar gave all the money he had to an elderly man of Aitha's 'Koodukattu'[1] and returned home with a heavy heart. His mother was treating a chick fallen from a red kite's paw. She put the bruised chick inside an inverted earthern vessel with a wide mouth and flat bottom and started moving a coconut shell over the pot round and round.

Shankar understood her intension. The sound of moving coconut shell would keep the chick conscious and alive. But her attempt proved futile. The chick lay still. In a hurry she took it to the river and threw it into the water. With mounting resentment she came back and abused the irresponsible hen - kotta, kali, hadbe, banchoot... She kept the other three chicks in 'kabegoodu', a small cane basket used for keeping the chicks ....

She was annoyed to see Shankar sitting on the door- sill, full of grief !

"Your impertinent endeavour is just like ploughing the

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1. Union of the members of a clan.

sand.. Performing a fire sacrifice in water is useless. You know that ? ..... What did you achieve by getting Vasu admitted to the hospital. You bit off more than you can chew ....

Everybody is destined to die according to his or her fate. None can escape from his fate. Life is just waiting for a call from 'Yama'. Understood? ....

Do you know what people have to say about Vasu ? He shouldn't have died in the hospital . His 'Kule'[1], will not get its 'nuppu niir'.(food) It is not easy to confine his soul under 'Niicha's feet. It would require a lot of money to perform the necessary rituals....

To be truthful, you are the person to be blamed. Your attempt to save your friend proved impudent and far from acceptance. I got into an awkward situation by your babblement. How can I tolerate all such comments. I with stood my anguish silently ....

Here, that devil kite snatched two chicks. The one which escaped from the kite's paws is dead too. That hen is a waste. That 'nasrani' was busy filling its own belly...

These days, those who lend a helping hand to others, not only get into trouble but also end up listening a volly of abuses. So take my word, it is better to be selfish !

Niilakka looked disgusted.

"I differ from you on all these points. If the medicine for tuberculosis available here, my father would have survived. You would not have been lonely .... God has got nothing to do in all this. Had I come early, I could have saved Vasu. He died because he didn't get proper treatment, on time .... Many of them in our village, pose like social workers but keep away from any genuine case - like Vasu's!

Niilakka said nothing. Twenty long years of her widowhood undulated before her eyes. The memories of the bad days moistened her eyes.

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1. The soul of the deceased person.

None of them could speak for a long time.

"Have your bath and come inside. I will serve you"

Shankar felt fresh after the bath but he couldn't eat a morsel. Grief had its toll on his appetite. Then he remembered something.

...."Where did I keep the bundle which Kusuma gave me in the morning ? "....

He searched his pant that he kept near the well. There it was in the back pocket ! A small paper bundle with crumpled notes summing upto Rs. hundred !

.... "Why should I keep this with me ? I must return it to her right now" ....

"I will be back soon, mother"

He left for Kusuma's house.

"It is getting dark. Don't be late."

Niilakka did not enquire much.

That was good.

He went straight to the bridge. Kamalakka's house was right there. He saw three men discussing in the corner of the front yard.

'Guests at home' thought Shankar. 'It is better to wait for the guests to leave. If I go there now, I won't be able to return her money'.

Shankar stood on the bridge. He could see the reflection of the sky in the water. He tried to enjoy the beauty of the reflection but Vasu's memories kept coming back to him ... His thoughts flashed back to his childhood.

... It used to be so good swimming in the river. Playing games in water was the most exciting ! How we enjoyed fishing crabs, prawns, 'Kandige'... ! How busy we used to be when engaged in collecting shellfish, during low tide in Summer ! How many times

we tried to count the migrating birds ! How many songs we had sung, sitting on the boat in the middle of the river !

During 'Navarathri', on Durgastami day, some people from the town used to come to the river to make some offerings to the Goddess as a custom. As soon as they leave we used to swim up to the deep spot and retrieve all the offerings - flowers, red clothes, fruits, bangles, coins etc.

And during the Ganesha festival, such a lot of fun we had ! Immersing Ganesha idols in the middle of the Suvarna river was a big ceremonial event awaited by all. The procession was really worth watching. It starts from the 'Mahalingeshwara' temple at Kallianpur to end in river bank.

The procession consisted of many men, dressed in different attires, some of them dressed as tigers. How they danced to the beats of the drums ! The 'gun man' among those 'tigers' was really a joker. The most attracting and exciting scene was that of 'Rayara Pili' [Some Ragavaraya had made a vow to participate in the Ganesha procession and dress up as a tiger, after he recovered from a long time illness.].

'Raayara Pili' was not a ordinary one. It had a long decorated tail. So it was made to stand on a raised platform and dance to the tune of a band set. The tail was visible to the whole crowd even from a distance.

.. Oh ! it seems like, the procession is going on right here in front of my eyes, now..."

Shankar enjoyed that illusion for a minute !

Then he remembered his early childhood adventures with Vasu. He had once gone to Nejar hillock to see the 'Mu!!a mut!e'[1] rituals on Diipavali day. He went to 'Gujjarabettu' a place near the sea, to witness 'Kambala', buffalo race, in a vast marshy field.

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1. A heap of thorny bushes arranged in an elavated place. It is burnt ceremoniously to mark the funeral of Narakasura, a mythological demon.

He could never forget the yelling and beatings that he recieved after each adventure. Yet he liked all the childhood pranks and adventures

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.....

"Such a pretty thing... we must get it."

.....

.... Oh ! the guests seem to be returning...

.....

It was getting dark . They did not see Shankar and were busy discussing something serious !

"She is pretty for sure, but not a virgin"

"No. You are wrong . I have guessed your intention. You want to bring down her price!"

"Anyway the bird is within our reach. That is more important."

"We should attempt to catch the prey only when her mother is drunk. We must be very careful. It is like catching 'madenji' fish in the well ! It slips ! We should keep a vigil."

Shankar could recognise the voice. It was Naruvanna, speaking in hushed tone. The other two men were unknown to him. One with a big moustache was in white pyjama. The other one was pot bellied, bushy haired.

' What are they upto ? ....'

For some reason Shankar remembered Sundari, Periera's girl friend. He felt uneasy. Everything was going blurred in front of his eyes. He could neither stay there nor could he meet Kusuma.

He returned home and slept on the 'Paṭṭas', a huge wooden box used for storing grains. The paper bundle with Rs. Hundred was still in his pocket.

He couldn't sleep the whole night. The strident blare beat of the 'dolu; was heard till late night from Aitha's house. Dum - Dum- Tere- Tere.. Dum.. Dum.. Tere ..Tere.. sounding misery. That was the same sound which he heard during all the thirteen days after his grandfather died. That is called 'savu dolu' - the drum beat at the death.

Aitha must have got his son's body buried at 'Katte Kuduru' a small stretch of land in the middle of the Suvarna river, used as a free burial and crematory place by poor people with no piece of land of their own.

'Aitha is crushed by grief. He is using his 'dolu' to come out of this. He has atleast a 'dolu' but I have none !

Shankar said to himself.

* * * * *

Niilakka was annoyed to look at her son sitting infront of his breakfast, immersed in deep thought.

"What is wrong with you ? You appear as if some one has hit you on your head ! Can you bring Vasu back to life. Every one has to die some day, sooner or later. You must think that his 'runa', relationship with this earth, is over and he had to return. We too are destined to die some day..."

"Do you know when did Vasu get this disease ?"

"He had it since one and a half months ."

"How did he get it ?"

"You know, there is a pond near that 'keedage bana'[1], which is full of dirty and muddy water?"

"You mean the one, villagers go fishing on the day of Yugaadi?"[2]

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1. A grove of fragrant screwpine plant
2. The new years day.

"Yes, the same one. There is an age old rule that one should fish in that pond, only on the day of 'Bisu' (Yugaadi) the new year day. Fishing is strictly prohibited on all other days. People say that, fish caught on other days will be full of blood ! "

"Every fish has blood, that is not surprising."

"Keep quiet.. like Vasu, you think you are the most intelligent. The youth of these days have unnecessary pride and are shamelessly rude. Due to that 'haughtiness', Vasu ventured to catch fish in that pond before the day of 'Yugaadi'.

Appi told me that he went there at dusk and caught many fishes and cooked all by himself and ate them. That very night, he had got fiver which continued for two weeks. Then he developed boils all over his body. He suffered from intense pain and grew weaker day by day. He could neither walk nor sleep. In addition the poor boy had no good nutrition either. Day by day his condition grew worser and his face darkened. He became a living corpse...

You, won't believe it, I know. The pond near the 'Keedage bana' is not any ordinary one. The bana over there is 'Naagabana', the Kaalinga serpent moves around there. Did you see the 'naaga stones' there under the big tree ? Vasu polluted the place, by entering it and polluted the water by fishing, that too' at an odd time.

The Naaga must have got annoyed and showed its fury on him. I had told Aitha, all this and advised him to do some kind of 'Saanti' a ritual to appease Naaga. He hesitated to consult the naaga expert. He was occupied with his own 'ajaal' and forgot everything when boozed ....

See the result ! He lost his only son. "

Niilakka gave the details with a chiding and pitied tone.

Shankar remembered her special postal covers which con-

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1. The fifth day of the lunar fortnight which is an auspicious day for serpent worship.

tained 'Gandha Prasaada' of 'Naaga', after 'Naagara Panchami' every year, adressed to him to Vishaka Patnam, Cochin, Bombay and Goa. So he thought it was useless to tell her about Vasu's illness. A staunch devotee of naaga, she wouldn't be convinced easily. So he kept the fact to himself... Yet he wished he should have come a few days earlier. He was sure that Vasu could have recovered if he got timely treatment from the people like Dr. Shenoy.

"What the hell has happened to Kamalakka? has she become an alcoholic ?"

"Don't ask me about her. She actually swims in alcohol. She is so careless even about her dressing these days. When I look at her in that condition, I feel as if somebody has put a dead snake on me !"

"Where is her husband ? Does he come home ?"

"No. He doesn't need her now as she is just one among his wives. He left her when she was pregnant. To him, she was a used plantain leaf. But her love for him totally left her blind. So she waited anxiously for his return. But he never turned up !

The child grew up oblivious of its father. And as the whiming voices of social disapproval reached high, she took to drinking. The habit aggravated due to dejection and depression. Now she is an alcoholic stupor ! When she is fully blown, she yells at him and threatens him all to herself... "Let him just step into my threshold, I shall cut his chest open with my sharp toothed sickle."

All these years her soliloquies were unheard ! How much ever she yells or gnashes her teeth, will it serve any purpose? No ! It is clear, that crook and irresponsible creature won't come back to her...

Poor girl, her daughter's life is in jeopardy. She is such a good natured young lady. I don't think Kamala , the drunkard, will ever be able to find a husband for her ....

* * * * *

Shankar went straight to the verandah. Kusuma was sitting alone in a corner. She saw him but kept mum !

What could he talk ? His mind went blank ! He sat on the edge of the Verandah and held the bundle out to her.

"There is no need for this money. Please take it."

What happened to Kusuma ? !

She turned her face towards the wall and wept uncontrollably !

Shankar could not find words to console her. He just stared at her !

She wept for a long time, then slowly controlled herself and turned her face.

"I was here last evening. But, I couldn't give you the money.? There were some guests here yesterday".

"Not guests, my enemies !"

"But your mother was speaking to them !"

"Why will she not ? She was totally blown. She agreed to what ever they said without knowing their true intention."

"I saw Naruvanna too !"

"Yes, that wicked fellow is behind all this"

"Did Naruvanna bring any proposal ?"

"Yes, that is true. Yesterday, the third one. The first two got concelled. I didn't go infront of them. I went into hiding."

"What do you mean ?"

"I hid in Aitha's house. Vasu had gave me some clue. Else, I can't imagine where would I have been by now. !"

Kusuma started sobbing.

"Don't cry. Don't burden your heart. "

He tried to console her.

He had a question ringing in his mind since he met her near the bridge, on his way to the hospital. He now sensed the depth of their relationship.

Both of them heard Kamalakka's voice from a distance.

"You please go away, now. You won't be able to see my mother's condition... Naruva, the crook, gives as much as she demands. I know how to teach him a lesson. I will never be a prey to their trap."

Shankar left hurriedly. He felt sorry for not returning the bundle...

'Where should I go ?'

He felt the void that was created with his friend's death.

'I miss you a lot my friend. There is no fun without you" he murmured to himself.

"It is easy to fetch the 'bird', but make sure her mother is drunk to the brim".....

He recalled Naruvanna's words. He could now link it to what Kusuma had said today-

"I will never be a prey to their trap."

..."Kusuma could hide twice in Aitha's house ! Vasu helped her and saved her from the kidnappers !

" Was this the message, Vasu was trying to convey to me in his death bed in the hospital ? " ....

Shankar now had a clear picture.

"Thath ..... Cruel Naruva and his entire gang of nasty people should butchered and their flesh, fed to the dogs !"

He was saying this himself, clenching his teeth.

Pereira used to say, "Bombay seems like heaven to everyone. But, there exists a hell within it. Poor, young innocent girls from the country side are in great demand in this Kamaatipura. There is a big network behind this secret business."

Once he had taken Shankar to the streets of this hell. So he could now picturise the dirty street in his mind,

.... At every door there was a call girl, all decked up as if for a fancy dress compitition, displaying coquetry. They attracted men walking on the street with some secret body language. The streets are thronged with men....

"Men with some money in their pockets, some urge in their waists and with only sex in mind will definitely become a prey. What about you my friend ?"

Pereira mocked at Shankar who was looking at them in amazement.

"These sexually excited men forget their wives at home, come here for a change. They are least bothered about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. But when the repeated visits result in health hazards they run to their wives. Those chastely women, devoted to their husbands render every service required to keep their 'living Gods' (ghosts!) happy and healthy. Don't you think, lucky are the ones who are born as males !?...

Life inside the brothel is just sickening ! It is like wasps haunting the honey pots ! After a few years of sex labouring in the brothel, those young girls become like the fibral remnant of sugarcane. Dejected and devoid of dignity, these girls are shunned by the society. They don't get any compassion from anybody. Most of these girls die of sexually transmitted diseases at an early age. They can't afford treatment, as their income is shared by those who run the brothel...

When I think Sundari's fate, I feel like burning down the whole Kamaatipura..."

Pereira seemed very restless and furious.

* * * * *

Shankar couldn't imagine Kusuma as an inmate of the 'hell' in Bombay. He felt sick to imagine her at the door of the brothel.

'No. never...' he muttered.

He decided to put an end to the secret plan of Naruva!

..."But how ? who could possibly help me ?

Where have you gone my friend ? I miss you Vasu. Both of us could have caught the culprits and put them behind bars. Should have actually torn them to pieces"...

He came to the river bank and sat there for a while. He framed a perfect plan but he realised that it would be hard to materialise, that too when Vasu is no more.

There was high tide in the river. The water was clear and he could see a school of tiny glittering fishes moving hither and thither. A little distance away, he saw a kingfisher sitting on a branch of the plant, jutting its head out . Suddenly it darted down, plunged into the river and caught a fish.

'How alert and quick it is !' He admired. He wished he could see how it would feed on it. But, hey ! it flew away with the fish in its beak !

May be the catch was meant for the hungry little ones waiting in the nest. That bird's nest is nothing but a horizontal hole in the steep hillocks.

He used to love bird watching, in his childhood. Vasu was an expert at locating the nests. He had a good knowledge about birds and could even explain the secrets of their mating.

Though he wanted to find out the nest, he decided not to follow the bird. He knew that, to be successufl, he would need Vasu's help....

...."These small birds know their parental responsibility very well - nest building, hatching, feeding, teaching the young ones to fly, hunting for food, fighting enemies etc.. But look at

the most intelligent species on the earth - men like Kusuma's father, Kamalakka's husband !

In Kamaatipura many children are born without knowing who their father is !...

* * * * *

When he came upto the 'Garodi', he heard the 'Chende'[1]. He was glad.

"I shall find somebody suitable to execute my plan and teach the notorious gang, a lesson"...

With all curiosity he entered the main gate. There he could see some early teenage boys, reading the dialogue of the Yakshagana Prasanga. Bhagawata, singer of yakshagana songs, Madappa Master and chende artist Shyamaraya were munching betel leaves with areca nut, lime and tobacco.

They were delighted to see Shankar and welcomed him. Their mouths held high taking care not to spill anything from their mouths.

Shankar realised that both of them wouldn't be of any help to him. According to him, they were like useless herbs, fit only to be on stage. Social work is out of their reach.

He decided not to disclose his plan.

"I will be sitting near the pond and hear your 'Parsanga' from there."

He sat on the steps of the big pond in front of the Garodi. He could hear the 'Parsanga' but couldn't pay attention. The streets of Kamaatipura was still fresh in his memory. The thought of those call girls, wearing thick lipstick made him feel very uneasy.

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1. A kettle drum used in Yakshagana folk theatre.

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"A young hen though acting as if pecking for its food, craves to hear the crowing of a young heroic Cock, ready to satisfy its lust. It does not care for the colour, caste or creed of the hero.

Have you seen what the cock does ? How it balances its body over the hen. And how the hen co-operates with him in that hasty roll of unison. Remarkable !"

"Give pereira a chance to open his mouth, he starts talking about sex !"

Mustafa , his friend used to annoy him by quoting a obscene adage... "Kuppa seems to be meditating on ...."

"Will you please shut up. The circumcized brat has never read any book on sex ! Please don't wag your tongue"

Pereira with his red radiated face scoffs back at Mustafa.

.....

.....

Shankar tried to divert his thought in some other direction but it clung on to the same.

... "A garden without a compound wall is easy to be squashed. Kusuma, the daughter of an irresponsible father and a drunkard mother can not hope for a better life. She may not yield to Naruva's plans but definitely would not reject a man like Vasu, "a heroic young cock". As a rule of the nature , a matured lady like Kusuma is attracted towards Vasu who is ready to help her and would satisfy her in full.

Vasu is no more now. What will be her fate ? ..."

Shankar once again remembered the conversation they had with Pereira.

.... "Do you see that man, with a pot belly, stepping out of

his car ? He seems to be very rich and willing to satisfy any of his wife's desire. But look at his wife. She is not happy. There is some secrecy revolving around their conjugal relationship. He cannot satisfy the urge in her. He is not a perfect hero.

You know, we cannot undermine the importance of sex in life. It dictates man's activities, both good and bad. The great Psychologist Sigmond Frued has formulated this opinion."

"Pereira why do you always keep talking about other people. Tell us about your mischiefs, and your experiences. I bet it will be more interesting and educative"

Mustafa coaxed Pereira.

"Any way we won't get tickets for the cinema. It is already 'housefull'. Let us hear your experience at length. Come on ... please, Pereira "

"I have not much to tell. I had a relationship with only one girl, my darling Sundari"

Mustafa was very excited.

"That is enough .. come on.. Let us go to a better place.. Oh ! there is one such place. You both go there , I'll get something to eat"

"You are after my story just as the cat is after milk"

"It is not simply a story. It is something more. I know it is your sweet memory, a secret treasure !"

The three of them sat in an isolated place and shared fried groundnuts. Mustafa was very inquisitive. But Pereira hesitated. He was in dilemma whether to disclose or not.

Mustafa could not restrain. He kept begging. So Pereira acceded to his request.

"... I was eighteen when I wrote my S.S.L.C. examination. It was so boring during the holidays. I was well built and looked more like an adult with beard and moustache. Therefore I was reluctant to join the junior boys of the neighbour hood...

We had a big mango tree in our back yard with a lot of mangoes growing on it. I loved to climb and pluck mangoes.

That day was a Sunday. Everybody had gone to church and I was alone at home. I climbed up the tree and shook a tree branch with all my strength. Sundari my neighbour saw this and came out of the house. She had to cross a small brook to reach the tree.

"Come soon and take all the mangoes. My Mummy may be here any moment. Then she won't let anyone touch them."

Sundari crossed the brook, taking care not to wet even her sari skirt in that salty water. She was in her teens - seventeen. At that age even the ass seems like an horse. Sundari was really a horse. Her beauty was incredible. I saw her crossing the brook. Her smile captivated me. Something magical about it.. I was like an intoxicated monkey, then...

I was excited to see her picking the mangoes. I noticed some changes in myself. Excitement and erection got hold of me and I was lost to her tender femalehood. I could no longer keep any distance...

What followed ? !. We were like the two opposite poles of powerful magnets. The secret place of our love play was a corner of our pig pen. She didnot oppose but abided to all my requests and instructions. Even now I do not understand how it all.. happened so smoothly...

Exactly after seven days, she was missing. My mother later brought the news that she had been taken to Bombay.

"Poor girl, her life was spoiled by her own people, the most indolent, ruthless people. Let them all go to hell. Let Satan, the Devil, look after them."

She cursed them repeatedly. I could not understand, why she cursed them, but, I swear, I missed my Sundari....

After a long time, I met her at Kamaatipura brothel. She was undergoing such a hell. Her languished look was

unforgetable. I felt like a culprit not having rescued her on time. I repent even now... I have lost interest in sex too.."

Pereira had suffered a lot of mental agony.

* * * * *

Shankar sat still on the steps of the pond, lost in his thought.

'...Those inhuman creatures are planning to sell Kusuma to the prostitution in Bombay.. I am sure, on the way, they are going to rape her.. one, two, three, the man with bushy hair, pot belly would roll on her... The wretched bull on a innocent cow !

Thath.....,"

He could feel his body straighten up and nerves break down...

He washed his face and went back to the same spot.

.... "If and if only, I had come a month earlier, Vasu would have been saved. I would have got them married. We could have also broken Naruva's bones along with his nasty gang....

All that I can do now is to see that wretched Naruva is punished"....'

"I will not be a prey to their trap."

What could be Kusuma's intension ?

He pondered ....

- Kusuma may commit suicide... She will jump into the river near the bridge. Surface thrice and then go deep and die...

The next day a bloated corpse would be seen floating up and down according to the tides ....

People at the bank may see the decaying corpse. They won't take any initiative but quietly thrust the body to the middle of the river using their long thin oars. They do not want any trouble from the police.

After a few days, the vultures that come from the Western ghats will make a meal out of her flesh. No body can stop them

He felt as if his blood freeze for a moment. He felt as though the vultures were hovering around his own head .... He tried to drive them away, but in vain.....

At last he came out of that illusion. He found hard to sit there. He went inside and sat beside Madappa Master who was singing a song of 'Koti-Chennaya Prasanga', playing the cymbal himself. Shymaraya drummed chende pouring the sentiments of heroism.

As the song ended the boys who enacted the twin heroes stopped dancing and started rendering the meaning to the song.

The dialogue was actually the vow of Koti-Chennaya, made to Perumala Ballala of Padumale in the royal assembly.

"We two brothers are verymuch into truth and justice. We live and die for the same. We never yield to exploitation. We are staunch opposers of all social evils...

As you wish, we obey your orders and shall leave Padumale. We will return to your 'boodu' only,

— When the cats get horns,

— When the boiled paddy sprouts,

— When the statue of Nandi stands up,

— When butter submerge in butter milk,

— When the black spot of 'gurugunji' seed vanishes,

— When a ladder could be made to climb the 'tumbe'[1] plant, and when the famous 'Ballamale' and 'Sullamale'[2] join together..."

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1. A medicinal plant.
2. Names of hills described in folk literature.

Shankar liked the dialogue, the presentation and the heroic gesture. " The boys are very talented' he said to himself. He wanted to talk with the boys but could not sit for long. He was growing restless. So he came out.

On the way at a distance he caught sight of an old and frail man, Govindajja... He was trailing his way on the bund of the field. Shankar wished to help him. But thought for a while, decided to avoid him and chose another embankment to his house, lest Govindajja follows and asks him for meal.. He desired to be alone.

It was twelve in the noon when he reached the frontyard of his house.

"Oh ! I got a best person to help me. Come on Shankar, lend me a hand. I have already finished the job of planting poles in the ground. Now let us tie the cane to the beams. The slope of the pendal should be perfect, else the rain water will not drain away completely.."

Sheena was elated to see Shankar

"O.K. , I shall help you out, I used to assist my grandfather in this kind of work."

"That was in the earlier days. Can you do all that now ?"

"Why not ? What ever we learn in our childhood, we remember it for the rest of our life, can do it anytime when necessary."

"That is right. Where were you in the morning "

"Since I have been left with no company I feel bored."

"How come ? Don't take it seriously. Ask Niilakka to find a bride for you. This is the right age to enjoy.."

Niilakka was busy feeding her cattle. She overheard their conversation. She was happy that Sheena was advising her son about marriage.

"Yes.... you are right Sheena. But he must have started off

from Bombay in an unauspicious moment. His friend's death is taking its toll on him. There is no use crying over the split milk. He doesn't understand that. He is at a low ebb. He doesn't even feel like visiting his uncle's house. It seems he has lost all his enthusiasm !

"There is some reason. Uncle's daughter is not a grown up girl..."

"Of course she is. She had come to maturity a long time back. At her age, I had given birth to Shankar."

"Oh ! Then What's the problem ? This is the right time to feed us with 'Paramaana'[1]. Arrange for the wedding ! That is really better"

"If I had come earlier, I would have been able to save my bosom friend."

"There is no point now. Who are we to change God's will ?"

"You are right, Sheena. If man was able to do that this universe would look so different".

"But one thing if Vasu was alive Kamalakka's daughter would have got a good husband. If he had married her, then the people of our village would have got a chance to wag their tongue. After outcasting the couple, the headmen of both the communities would have kept curling their moustaches ! Isn't it so Niilakka ? I think, you support my opinion."

"Yes for sure. Haven't you heard the proverb ? One can close the mouth of a big pot but not that of a man. People keep talking without knowing the truth. Kusuma was tending the sick Vasu but the idiotic people inturn started to blow things out of all proportion. Do you believe in it too. ?

You know that the 'heads' themselves are a useless lot. Give them some money, the corrupted minds openly declare, even

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1. A sweet semi - solid dish.

the harlots as chaste. Do they ever try to help those, poor, innocent, unprotected girls, who are been abducted and sold in the cities ? Do they ever bother to stop the 'business' ?..."

Shankar was infuriated at the plight of those young ladies at Kamatipura...

"Sheenanna, can I ask your help regarding something ?"

'I will never say 'no' to anybody asking for help. My mother has never taught me the word 'no' !! But, now I should be leaving. It is really getting late for my midday toddy work. See you later.'

So saying he was ready with his curved sickle and other accessories.

As he was about to leave, they heard the Drumming ! - Drummer, Daburi Doojanna was announcing,

"- Listen ! Watch !! Enjoy !!!

Brothers, sisters, ... Children, young and old, ...There is going to be a Yakshagana show at Kallianpur. Devi Mahatme Parsanga[1] will be enacted on a beautifully lit Ranga Mantapa... Last show of the season. A feast for eyes and ears. Do come and enjoy the performance, lest, you should regret later -

He thus went round the village. A big crowd of children swarmed around him. Some of them had worn only a shirt while others were in tattered shorts. Yet, they seemed elated and kept shouting in chorus., 'Daburi Doojanna' being the thriller for the day.

Shankar recollected his childhood memories. He used to be there in the group of kids following the drummers , pipers, etc. They followed them door to door like fanned calves shouting shrill, happy, shrieks of joy. 'chikmela', 'flower pole', 'dasayya', 'baliyendra', 'madira' etc were also the source of excitement but the swarming and shouting were limited. Most of the boys got

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1. The theme or episode enacted in Yakshagana theatre.

tight slaps from their elders at the end of the day. But who cared? After all enjoyment is, what mattered !

"Sheenanna, shall we go to 'Yakshagana' today ?"

"I am not interested. I am worn out and exhausted. More over I have to wake up early in the morning. So I need a good sleep at night. I have no time to spare for any sort of entertainment or hobby."

"Oh ! But, you seem to be getting enough time at the liquor shop."

"People of our caste boast of this favourite pastime. But I earn a trifle. I rarely get money to spare for liquor. Yet, I love to consume atleast a bit. I can't refrain myself. If is a tonic to me.

But I am not a drunkard. You see, the toddy tapping job of mine asks for punctuality. So my life has become like the ox going around the oil wheel. This labourious work yields so little."

"Why do you still continue toddy tapping ?"

"You see, I don't have any cultivating land as an ancesteral property. So I opted this job... Oh ! it is getting late. I will talk to you later. O.K. ? "

He took their leave immediately.

Shankar asked his mother, 'How many children has he got?"

"His wife is either pregnant or lactating. Due to lack of food and rest she has become very feeble. Her condition is like the frog which has lost its intestine."

She said sympathetically.

Sheena is a good man. Though lucky enough to get toddy, he spends a considerable amount on liquor. So it becomes difficult for his wife to keep the pot boiling. She strives hard to bring up her six children, all boys.. Thank God.

Nowadays she too goes out to earn as cooli worker. She leaves her child under my care. Sheena sometimes, comes home totally blown and yells at her, while the children manage to hide themselves. As a irresponsible father he screams, "God is the creator. He has to look after my children." Being an obstinate he could never tolerate his wife's protests. Her single word of helplessness would fan the flame. It is so exasperating to see him in a drunken state."

"Who does he sell his toddy to ? I think it is quite illegal to sell toddy in the house."

"He delivers it to the contractor at a very low price. He gets three coins while the contractor gets six, exactly half."

"I believe the toddy tappers will never be prosperous. They must unite and fight for their rights."

"It is only a dream" Niilakka remarked coldly.

"I want to go to the Yakshagana show. Do you want to come with me ?"

"No. I won't I had seen one 'bayalaata' [1]last summer. What an experience it was ! Really horrible ! The annoying howl still lingering in my ears !"

"Which 'Parsanga' was it ?"

"It was 'Miinaaksi Kalyaana'. When Miinaaksi stepped on the 'Rangastala'[2], a stranger darted into the stage and thrashed all the gas lights using a 'talvaaru'[3]. Before people could hear the sound tun tun, "Miinaksi" ran for his life !

Then there was a big commotion in the darkness !

Audience started to run helter - skelter from the field. I was sitting on the mat with Sheena's child in my arms. Two other children were sleeping in front of us. We could not run away but managed to save ourselves from the stampede. By the grace of

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1. Yakshagana play
2. A stage in the theatre
3. A sword

Bemmeru, Baiderlu we were safe. But the blood curdling incident left a long lasting impression !

"Was there a fight or any misunderstanding in the village before the bayalaata commenced ?"

"No idea. The Police descended the next day and scoured about the village, but in vain. There was a rumour that the notorious man had some vengence against 'Miinaksi' the enactor. What ever it may be that is not the right way to take revenge. Let the scoundrel die of hunger and thirst."

Niilakka cursed in an unusual voice.

"Very strange ! Culprits get away unpunished ! Corruption has to be wiped out completely."

"Yes. You are right. But how ?"

Lowing of the cattle reminded Niilakka of her duty to feed them. They were totally eight in number. Five cows and three calves... all non yielding !

"Why do you keep them all ?"

"Let them be, poor dumb creatures. I bought four sterile and discripit cows from the butcher. I saw him dragging the reluctant cows through our coconut grove, couldn't tolerate their baying. So I purchased them at various occassions. After that the butcher never tred this path !

See these two calves. Aitha got it free from somebody. When Vasu fell sick, he didn't feel like keeping them and brought them to me.

And she is Gouri, my father's favourite. She lost her calf soon after her second delivery. The agony left her dry. She is carrying again now. Six months up. Look at her first calf, a good breed. I hope Bobbarya don't cast his bad eyes on her and let it all happen without any trouble, this time. I never missed to offer him his due offerings on each Sankraanti day."

Niilakka loved to talk about her cattle to anybody willing to listen.

Shankar remembered the offerings, the rice cakes "gatti" to the cattle saviour, Bobbarya.

"Next time you arrange for the offering, call me I'll take it to Bobbarya."

Shankar chuckled to himself.

'You, mischivous boy, you used to eat the 'gatti' meant for Bobbarya.. As a boy you were very fond of eating. Do you remember ? My father nick named you "Agoli Manjanna"[1], He doted on you so much. He used to serve you on festive occasions.

Oh ! it is time for lunch. Come on, let us have our lunch."

She went to kitchen to get the lunch ready.

Shankar had a fervent desire to watch the last show of the season. 'Deevi Mahaatme' by Karnaataka Meela was going to be marvellous, he knew.

"I am badly in need of a company. Oh! Vasu, my comb has been cut without you. Where are you my dear friend ?..... Alas! ! you are in the burrial ground in Kattekuduru...."

He shook his head, as though to banish some thoughts. But it lingered and took dimensions..... Vasu's decaying body, grieving Aitha, the sufferings of Sundari at he brothel... floating corpse of Kusuma and vultures feeding on it .....

The dog 'Kaalu' began to bark loudly and ran towards the cattle shed. A big frog with a bleeding wound on its back had come hopping to the middle of the front yard and kept staring at Shankar. It looked scared and was respiring very fast. Shankar didnot shoo it away but kept watching.

Then he saw a big rat snake over the fence. It was scared of

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1. Name of a hero known for his strength and prowess. He was a good eater with strong appetite.

the dog. The frog might be terrified of the snake, the dog and Shankar, Yet, it was there infront of him in the middle of the yard.

Shankar thought, '..... "this frog has used a little of logic. The snake won't enter the yard when a man seems to be present. Supposing the dog tries its luck to catch it, the man will shout at the dog. So it stay near a man than being a prey to other enemies. The frog has found the protector in me at that fateful moment..."

The snake quietly left the scene. The dog chased it for a while, on returning it felt the urgency of urinate. It lifted its leg and urinated on a small pole used to tie the grazing calf. The frog too moved slowly to a safer place.

The Summer midday seemed dry and dull.

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Shankar arrived late to the Yakshagana show. By then the show had already commenced. The tent was houseful. Yet he managed to get a ticket for a seat on a bench. The 'Rangastala' was beautifully decorated. The audience seemed to be engrossed and enjoying the Prasanga.

But after a while, he felt uneasy to sit on a bench without backrest in the last row, next to the entrance. He found it difficult to follow the conversation. He could not enjoy the Prasanga and admire the talent of the artists.

As a boy, he always sat right at the front of the bayalata stage with Vasu on a braided palm leaf. Their friends Sompa, Jagga, Chenna, Jannu and others considered Vasu as an untouchable. They were annoyed to see them both hand in hand. Sitting at about a foot away from them on the mat, they used to tease Shankar, who protested by shouting at them, - "You monkeys go on a bamboo bier....."

At the middle of the show when the boys feel sleepy, Shankar

as a revenge used to throw mud on their mat and sometimes even tore it .....

Seated on the bench, at the rear end, Shankar could not concentrate on the story. He was dozing. He tried to be awake but yawning frequently. He came out of the tent and started walking back home with his new torch on and no fear of snakes in mind.

He took fast long strides.. When he reached the wooden bridge he was tired. He sat on the steps and watched the star spangled black sky. When his enthusiastic attempt to form a design by grouping the stars in the sky seemed futile, he remembered a riddle, -"The coins given by a father cannot be counted, the mat spread by a mother cannot be folded"-

Riddles and proverbs convey such everlasting truths. "Vedas may be falsified but not the proverbs " This very sentence highlights the importance of the proverbs. It is beyond the power of human brain to understand the vastness of the universe." He said to himself.

"Dudum".....!

A splashing sound is heard at the other end of the bridge. The river was very deep at that end. He switched his torch on. He could see the ripples on the water. He could see somebody sinking... "who ?!"

He flashed his torch to that end threw his shirt and lungi, and dived into the water. Luckly he caught hold of the hair and brought the person to the bank. He administred first aid that he had learnt in Navy which proved a success.

He had saved Kusuma !

When she regained her consciousness, she recognised him.

"Why did you save me. I must die."

She tussled on the mud.

Shankar tried to console her.. He held her close to his body.

"I must die" she repeated, embracing him tightly !!

There was complete silence, except for the beating sound of their hearts.... lab-dab - lab - dab - lab - dab ..... and the ticking of his wrist watch !

The closeness had a soothing effect.

"Why did you do this, Kusuma ?"

His voice was very intimate. But she remained silent.

"Killing yourself is the only way you could think of to avoid those men ? Is it ?.... We should not lose heart .... Kusuma..."

She broke up. Shankar clasped her.

"We must see that the culprits are punished. Fighting against the odds is the real hallmark of bravery. Fortune favours the brave... Kusuma, please stop worrying"

He said consolingly and held her close to his chest.

"You leave them to me. I shall beat the unruly horse with a whip. Trust me. I give you my word that you will not be a prey to them .."'

Kusuma stopped sobbing.

Silence prevailed for a while.

"I must leave"....

She said and left.

Shankar put on his shirt and lungi and stood there on the wooden bridge for a long time. Something unusual flashed across his mind. After racking his brain, he came to a conclusion. He was determined to achieve what he planned. He looked up at the sky, feeling happy with himself.

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"The expected guests were not to be seen for three nights now. Did they get any clue of our plans? What do you say, Sheenanna ?"

"No. That is impossible. We are hiding here under the bridge, amidst the bushes. No body in our village would dare to wander at night. The fear of 'buutha-preetha'[1] is rooted deep in their minds. The only person who dares to come out is Inas Lewis, who does fishing with the help of his petromax lamp, especially when the tide sets in. At times you do get to see wizards of 'Amma' group moving about at night.

I feel that, Naruva and his gang might have found some other girl. Our attempt seems to be futile."

Sheena was dead tired. He was in low spirits.

"Who ever the girl is, her fate looks scary"

"Dont rack your brains on every soul on earth. It is beyond our capacity to comprehend all the misdoings of this world. We can't help. Glow worms cannot light up the whole world. Do you get my point ? The mouse can not think of casting a shadow like an elephant. We have wasted three full nights and exhausted ourselves. Our intension to punish those men flopped just like digging well in the river..."

Shankar considered this counsel as biting remarks, but, accepted it.

.... 'It was hard for Sheenama to stay awake. So he tried to discourage me. It is my fault to drag him into all this.'....

He realised his mistake but was hellbent to punish the gangsters..

..'Who could possibly be of help ? Sompa could. But he too works from dawn to dusk at his father's grocery shop. It is unlikely that he could come and stay vigilant all night. Another obstacle being his mother. She is a big mouth. She is fond of gossips too...'

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1. evil spirits

Shankar wanted to keep the whole mission a secret.

"Naruva deserves some sure punishment for his triviality. But who can assist me in this irksome hunt .... Vasu was an expert... But now ? Oh ! Vasu ! "

He folded his fingers and formed a fist and then let it loose. He repeated this four times. This was his way suppressing his anger or agony ....

' It is wise to execute the project all by myself. I have to keep up the promise made to Kusuma', he decided.

.....

"Shankara, it is not leading us anywhere. So it is better to give up."

"Yes. You are right Sheenanna"

He agreed..

* * * * *

Shankar enjoyed hot tea and specially prepared 'rotti'. Then he opened his leather bag and took out all things that he had planned to gift Vasu.

"Whom shall I gift these ?"

He set aside two shirts for Govindajja.

'Poor fellow, always wears tattered clothes. He will be more than happy to wear these. Ups and downs in his life made him understand that beggars cannot be choosers. So he accepts what ever people have to offer him.'

Shankar recalled the long story behind Govindajja's helplessness. He was a sucessful hotelier, some years ago. He owned a big home and property at the seashore near Bengre. His family lived in a great comfort and luxury.

But during one Monsoon the sea engulfed his property along with his house and hotel. Eventually Govindajja was thrown at the mercy of his in-laws. His family disowned him deliberately. Slowly he became blind and had lost the battle of life. Poverty, disappointment and failure made him a sad faced beggar. No body had any regard for him, while some believe that he pretends to be blind though not actually so !

If one lies down his mat hates him too !.....

However Shankar had a soft corner for the crippled Govindajja. Even as a boy he used to give him rice, though he asked for only rice water ! He helped him take a straight path whenever he saw him staggering. He used to give him a four anna coin yearly as an offering after he cleared his exams and was promoted to the higher classes.

Shankar kept his bag in a corner and checked on his purse. There were only a few notes. Yet he asked if his mother needed some cash ! She was hesitant to ask money but wished to have a wollen rug for the rainy season.

"I forgot to bring one from Bombay. There we get quality goods for a low price."

"Don't worry. You can buy it from Pandya's cloth shop at Udupi."

Niilakka got busy with her cooking. She sensed that her son was in gay spirit. So she asked him to visit his uncle's house.

"Why don't you go today? Else, he will blame me for not sending you there. Do pay a visit and inturn invite them all here, the next Sunday. That day we have 'Jumaadi Koolaa' at Garodi. I will be offering a big cock."

"O.K. I shall, go there today." He said beaming with satisfaction.

He had a good bath in the open, enjoying every pour straight from the well. He sang to himself "Merii dosthi Mera Pyar...", from a latest Hindi film 'Dosthi'. He then put on his new white shirt, sky blue pant and did his hair imitating Dilip Kumar's hair style.

He counted his notes, totally twenty three, amounting just one hundred and fifteen. After buying a rug, he would hardly be left with anything. So he thought of writing to Pereira to send him some hard cash.

"Nice chap, Pereira, a real gentleman. I am lucky to get this witty and jovial man for a friend."

He said to himself looking at the small photograph of Pereira in his wallet.

Then he felt a need to return Kusuma's money immediately.

..."She seems to be recovering from dejection. Yesterday I saw her in high spirits. I am sure she won't cry. If she rejects the money, I know how to handle her. Yes I can win..'

He tied his shoe lace and was ready to leave. Niilakka approached him and said. "Get Prema along when you return. She will help me in the kitchen."

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1. divine powers

"Oh ! You want Prema only to help you out but not play with me" He smiled.

"You played with her in your childhood. You can do so now, only after the wedding. She has become a very pretty young lady."

"Just that won't do, she has to turn eighteen".

"You are twenty four. According to me she must be nineteen. You both will make a good pair".

"Are you, by any chance, a marriage broker ?" asked Shankar, mockingly. He was in a happy frame of mind.

Niilakka took it for granted that he was ready to marry his 'Mama's daughter' Prema. She thanked 'Bemmeru Baiderlu, silently. She was contended.

* * * * *

With pleasant thoughts, Shankar reached Kusuma's house. She was alone there. Patients wish and the doctor's priscription are one and the same, he thought.

Kusuma was watering the coconut trees. She was handling two big earthern pots. Each time she filled the pots from a near by pond just behind the house. She had tucked her sari above her knee

Shankar was there at the outeryard, unnoticed, observing her from all angles... Kusuma looked very tempting even in her old cotton sari. Her long plaited hair with flower on it swaying in tune with her movements. The mark of vermilion on her forehead added to her beauty.

Shankar was keenly watching her womanly figure. Suddenly he was reminded of Pereira's advice to Mustafa.

"Don't observe a woman's face alone. Take a look at her from all angles. Ladies have a seductive beauty from behind too.."

Shankar compared Kusuma to Sundari. He felt Pereira was unlucky !

He got reminded of a saying.

- Beauty in a woman is like a flower in spring but virtue is the star in heaven -

'Kusuma has both beauty and virtue'

He convinced himself. He was in a strange reverie for a while.

Alas ! He was distracted by the barking of Kamalakka's dog which came running scenting Shankar, from the river side. How could a dog smell the intension and temptation of Shankar's mind and body ? !

Kusuma saw Shankar, left her pots, and came hurriedly to him. She was in a flutter. She brought a small chair to the verandah and pleaded him to sit. But he sat making himself comfortable on the floor at the edge of the verandah, leaning against a pillar with his legs stretched.

"When are you leaving to Bombay ?"

"Yes, I must go."

"I mean, are you here for a long stay ?"

"Ya ... I mean ... no ... what ?"

"It seems you are lost in some deep thought"

"No, I have not been thinking, I am just admiring the beauty in front of me."

Kusuma blushed. Her head bent down. She flipped her long plait in front and started playing with it.

A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance. Shankar was elated to see her cheerful face.

There was perfect silence. Silence was a bliss. They sensed the bondage...

At last Shankar broke the silence.

"Sheenanna and I were waiting there under the bridge for three successive nights. No body turned up ..."

"Let them all go to hell"

Cheerful Kusuma was now sad again. After a lot of difficulty Shankar was able to coax a smile on her face.

"Don't worry. Let those wicked men set their foot here. I have a plan to nab them."

"How can you do that ? Are you planning to stay here for long ?"

"Yes. I have to remain here a little longer, for your sake. my dear."

Silence once again.

Disappointment, helplessness and joy merged into one great consuming emotion. Some thing stirred inside her... Suddenly she looked at his eyes.

Eye to eye contact... Both of them felt as though they are floating in the river of joy unmindful of the merits and demerits..... let alone the barriers !

Shankar saw tears in her beautiful eyes. He wanted to wipe it and clasp her hand warmly. He was tempted to embrace her in total. He was about to do so.. only a step between them..

"You scoundrel how dare you do that ? If you touch the body, I will rip your chest apart. My husband has gone to hell. Go away from here... I have nothing....."

Kamalakka was stepping down the bridge. Shankar sensed danger. He jumped out of the verandah and told Kusuma in a hushed voice... "I am going on a short visit to my uncle's place. See you in the evening."

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1. A kind of jaggery made from toddy and wrapped up in palm leaf.

Holding the dog in her hands and shouting at it, at the top of her voice, Kamalakka reached home. She was glad to see Shankar.

"Oh, Shankar ! I got the news that you had come, but I couldn't see you at all."

Shankar realised that her abuses were not directed at him. He would now breathe freely.

"I actually came to see you today. Do you remember, you used to give me 'Oole bella' ?[1] Is there any today...?"

"Yes, I remember. Parmeshriakka was supplying that fresh and delicious 'bella'. She is no more. How can I give it to you now ?.... I heard there are a lot of kan̤dige[1] fish in our river. I know you are very good at catching kan̤dige. Niilakka used to give us once in a while. After you left, I never got to eat that fish fresh from river. If you catch some, please give a few to me."

"O. K. I'll try, but tomorrow. Today I am on my way to my uncle's house. I will be back in the evening. I shall require a pair of big sticks for fishing. Could you please keep them ready."

"That won't take long. I will cut the sticks right now."

Shankar left the place. He looked back at Kusuma's kitchen window from the bridge. She was standing right there. He was proud. He forced his legs to move on.

Kusuma basked in the light of his love. Suddenly the world seemed so colourful and bright. A lot of emotions crept into her. It was as if the plant of happiness had come up with many shootings. She felt her throat contract in a spasm of joy.

The tide was high. She saw her saviour's image in the water. The image danced with the tide. The sky looked bright and clear.

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1. A kind of fish

Shankar reached his uncle's house just when his uncle returned from the 'cock fight yard'. The dog started barking aloud and gave both of them a warm welcome.

His uncle was holding two cocks, one was tucked under his shoulder and he held the other, the dead one, by its legs thus hanging freely from his right hand. Its head touched the ground. . There were some blood stains on his lungi and shirt. His shawl was dirty and stinking. He had been munching betel nut, saliva dripping from one side of his mouth.

"So, you have come at last ! That is nice. Today you can taste the curry of a 'fighter cock.' I have just won it in the game."

"I have no craze left for any non-veg stuff. We get to eat a plenty of them in our ship."

"Chath... That must be rotten. This is a fresh one, you know, it will be very munchy and yummy.

"I thought that cock fight was banned long ago."

"Yeh, Yeh..... It should not be banned. If so, how will people like me get any entertainment ? You know, today's cockfight was a big one. It was arranged in that huge 'baakimaaru'[1] field in front of that famous 'bayila illu'[2] in Tonse. Two hundred pairs of cocks participated. The crowd was uncontrollable. It seemed as though it would continue till tomorrow morning.....

I went upto the yard early and my 'fighter' matched with Kutti's cock. In the fight my 'bunṭe', hero, emerged victorious and there was a loud applause. It was indeed a reward to me.

I took every care to look after him. So he always emerged as a hero in the fight. What a nice scene !" He bragged.

"Cock fight is the worst game I have ever seen."

"Not at all. It was very interesting ! We just tied a sharp

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1. A large open field
2. Name of a house

blade to his leg and coaxed him by massaging his tail. Out he rushed to his opponent. rup- rup- rup.... hit him who was too weak to retaliate. He was grounded in the first round itself. Kutti's people tried a lot to encourage him to stand, but he fell flat.

You should have come with me there today. You too have enjoyed to your hearts content. One should see such games; really a marvellous one !"

Uncle sounded very excited. He had won the cock. Besides, he had had enough of alcohol too. He started dressing the chicken himself and ordered his wife and daughters to get about cooking soon.

Everybody got busy. Shankar could hear a lot of noises from the kitchen - grating of coconut, grinding of masala and the making of dosas. Nobody was interested in speaking to him. So he went up to the shed where his uncle was chopping the featherless bare cock on a wooden lock, specially meant for the purpose.

"Mama' how long do you think this 'cock fight' will go on ?"

"Why do you worry ? It is an age old game. It won't come to an end. Hope that it will not."

"It is foolish to call it a game. You tie a knife to the innocent creature's leg and force them to fight and die a very painful death ! You call it enjoyment, don't you ? Some of them even gamble over it. Such a pity ! People spend most of their meagre income on the game. But what about their family ? Children hardly get enough food or education. That is the reason why our community is deteriorating. Very sad !"

"You shut your mouth, will you ?" he said bluntly. "You don't have a taste for this game. As the cocks are coaxed to fight and are made to enter the fighting yard, they stare at each other with so much of anger, that they charge at each other at full speed and vigour. Sometimes we even tend to forget where we are. It is such a rare experience. I have heard about wrestling and boxing and other such kind of sport but according to me this is the finest. "

"According to me it is a cruel sport."

"I see ! I remember one proverb - "A dog seldom relishes lemon pickle - This is applicable to you too. Try to get a taste of it, you will know the difference."

"I believe that a man who has no concern for other creatures can only enjoy such games. I can not."

"Oh ! So you don't agree with me. And don't be under the impression that all that you do in the Navy is good."

The conversation was getting hotter.

Shankar wanted to advise his uncle but he knew his uncle would never yield. He was a lazy bum who always nags his wife. He was lucky to have very innocent lady as his wife. She was the only daughter and so the only heir to her father's property. She had a lot of patience and therefore was cautious enough to avoid disputes. That in turn led her husband to live on an even keel without shouldering any responsibility.

Shankar felt that it was useless to talk to such an impertinent man. He remained silent.

"You see, my fighter cock, 'Kemmaira'[1] has already beaten six cocks, known popularly as 'Bhima' in the fighting yard. He chops off the opponents thighs. His cuts are the deepest ! He has never succumbed to any back stroke ....."

Shankar paid no attention to his uncle's lengthy recitals. He was actually angry with the 'Kemmaira'. Had he not won the battle, there was no urgency for the feast. He could have just said "I will come again some other time". But now the cooking was already in progress and he could not go back. He was in a fix.

He had promised Kusuma that he would see her in the evening but how can he make it now ? He was very sorry...

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1. red-tawny coloured cock

He imagined a meeting with Kusuma. He memorised the words that he would be saying to her.

The dinner was really grand. His aunty, Leela kept on serving and watched him eat. The soft thin doosa, 'thellavu' with chicken curry tasted good.

The tasty 'thellavu' reminded him of his grandfather. He used to praise a lot about her cooking. He had a soft corner for his rich but placid daughter-in-law. Infact, Leela aunty's parents gave her in marriage to uncle only because they respected grandfather. Whenever uncle rebuked her in his fits of rage, grandfather always supported aunty and scoffed at him.

"You keep your mouth shut. I know how capable you are ! You only know, to hurt other's feelings with your sharp tongue and with your ruthless manners. 'Kaalu', our dog is far better than you in every sense !"

Niilakka too used to speak high of her.

"Leela does not look tired even after slogging so much. There is always a sweet smile on her face !".....

Shankar felt like dozying after a heavy meal.

"Come on, Shankar, let us go to Raghu Shetty's house. He has invited all of us to the annual ritual of "Bhuta Koola."

"No, I am full and inert. More over, I don't like to attend such rituals."

"How could you ? I have noticed that you have changed a lot after joining the Navy. Do you think you are the most intelligent.?"

"It is not that. I don't like, men exploiting others in the name of God and devils. I don't favour any animal sacrifice."

"Oh ! In that case you are a rationalist. But think of Raghu Shetty. He was so poor in his childhood. I used to always see him in torn clothes. He went to Bombay without bed and board, but now he is a big shot, the owner of two hotels. Every body in

our village respects him. He undertakes this 'Koola', every year to honour the diety 'Chaundi'. He says openly that what ever he has is because of Chaundi, the protecting daiva. He has also been spending lavishly on the rituals like 'Naga thambila', 'Dakkebali' etc. What do you have to say to that ?"

"Raghu Shetty was poor and had suffered a lot in his childhood. He was always determined to become rich. He believed that hardwork and intelligence would lead him to success. And in Bombay people spend a large amount on delicious dishes. That is the secret of his success."

"O.K. So, you won't be coming. But I must go. Other wise he will feel bad. I will come back soon"

Uncle must have felt hurt to learn that Raghu Shetty had become rich by sheer hard work. So he stopped the arguement, flung his clothes on, tied a turban around his head and set out for the 'Koola'

As soon as he crossed the gate aunty and her daughters - Prema, Pushpa and Sumathi all of them came for a long chat with Shankar. They all loved him very much.

* * * * *

Shankar was fast asleep but woke up suddenly at midnight to the beats of the drum and fire crackers. He sat up on the bed. He could hear the awe inspiring grunts from the 'Koola' site. He recalled the scenes of Bhuta Koola that he had witnessed in his childhood. He imagined the heroic feat of the spirit- placing the fire from the oiltorch close to the chest, the wild vigorous dance, the mysterious stares, various gesticulation, the different varieties of dances with the special 'Aṇi'[1].

He could not get even a wink of sleep there after. When he closed his eyes, he could see Kusuma, her attractive eyes, and wondered how she had gained so much importance in his life.

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1. A kind of ornamental structure, worn on the back by the Bhuuta dancer.

He recalled Pereira's words.

"... You can taste the girls only by touching them and not just by looking at them."

Shankar sensed the truth. He recalled the night he saved Kusuma. He had cuddled her. What a pacifying experience it was ! He was excited by this intimacy. At that moment he felt glad that he could save her life. But today at the midnight hour, he craved for Kusuma.

"Am I a man of lust ?"

"Was Vasu enamoured of Kusuma. Did he spent time with her talking about love? Did he hug her ?"

The thought was very exasperating.

"Why should I commit to her in a hurry ?"

Shankar's mind wanderd over morbid details, as to how far Kusuma admited vasu.

.....

"Is she carrying a posthumous child ?"

.....

"No, No.... their relationship might have been purely platonic. She is a blooming flower, a virgin meant for me. I could see my own image in her beautiful glittering eyes.."

He smiled gleefully.

Once Pereira had told Mustafa,

"Do you know how powerful sex is? It has something really unique in it .... no fear, no shame , total broad mindedness. It is just nothingness !

Shankar longed for that 'just nothingness...!

He remembered yet another incident.

... He was taking a walk with Pereira on the Beach at Bom-

bay. A unidentified lady came up to them with a cry of desertion.

"Please catch that fellow for me. He has cheated me. He ran in this direction, a man wearing a black coat. That crooked man of fair exterior with a foul interior, promised me fifty bucks. But before I could get up he slipped away. Please help me get the money."

Pereira observed her messy dress, hair, lips red, so red with lipstick and decorated eyes. He took out his purse and handed her fifty rupees.

"I have just finished with him, there, behind that bush. I can't oblige to you right now. Please help me to catch that rogue who deluded me."

"Never mind. You keep this with you. I am giving this in his stead."

The lady was pleased

"You both have not taken any favour from me but that man was really a notorious bull. I was so tired and could not get up all at once. How can I chase him ? Let him go to the devil...

I should have taken the amount in advance. Why did I obey him ? It is all my fault. ... Isn't it ? I am a fool. Don't you think so? Now it is no use worrying. I committed a mistake .... Let him die before dawn..."

She continued like an insane lady.

Shankar fought back the urge to slap her. He asked, "Pereira, what is she speaking ? She is totally a stranger to us. Yet she speaks as though we are her customers. You should have punished her. But you are beguiled into losing money for this swine."

"Shut up.. will you ? It is usually poverty that gets them into this dirty business. For her, all men are the same. Identity does not bother her. This is not a kind of relationship... knowing each other, understanding, appreciating each other's

qualities, pleasure persuit, the feeling of oneness, etc are totally absent in this business."

"I wonder how such an ugly bitch gets customers !"

"Don't exhibit your innocence. I have told you that sexual urge doesnot ask for beauty. This lady is not as incapable as you think, but is successful in her profession. To her satisfying the body hunger of her customers is a mechanical job.... The dog wants the bone to bite . It does not ponder whether it is of a goat or a bull !"

"You are very strange ! Don't you feel bad at the loss of fifty bucks....?"

Pereira smiled,

They sat together on the beach watching the beating surf of the Arabian sea. Pereira was silent all the while.

"Where are you my friend ? Are you with Sundari behind the pig pen or inside the sugar cane field or ....."

Pereira laughed clumsily !

.....

.....

Shankar heard some strange sound !

Somebody seemed to be digging the earth !

"Why should any one do this at this deadly hour ?"

He was stunned and curious. So he walked upto the compound wall in the darkness. He could see four men and two ladies at the corner of the adjacent compound. A lady was holding the lamp. One man had a big beard and had covered the upper part of his body with a red shawl. He was chanting some mystical verse.

"What is it ?

.....

Must be witchcraft."

He controlled the upsurged curiosity to observe the whole procedure. He was scared to stay there for a long time, as snake phobia got hold of him again. He decided to call the troupe to his own house and test the genuineness of the practice.

"I must put an end to all these practices of exploiting the poor and the illiterate"

He took it as a challenge and then tiptoid into the house and slept.

A little while later his uncle returned from 'Chaundi Koola' He then slept on the wooden coffer at the left side of the portico. Though awake, Shankar did not want to speak to his uncle. So he pretended to be fast asleep.

Slowly he fell into a light slumber and he had a dream.

He saw Kusuma adorned in a beautiful costume. She had worn jasmine flowers on her hair. She came running in a slow motion towards him. He stretched his arms out and took her in it and whispered a few words in her ears...

They were standing hand in hand on the bridge.... They enjoyed boating on the river. Splashed water on each other.....

Shankar went to the river to fish. He held the two long sticks and coaxed the young 'Kandige' fishes to hide on the soft sand bed in the water with their eyes open in the scanty transperent water. He caught one by one and put them into a bag hanging from his waist. He gave all of them to Kamalakka....

"Shankar, please don't go to Bombay. You stay with your mother. I will give my only daughter to you in marriage. Please accept her and look after her.... Her father is no more ! Can you promise me that you will never let her down, no matter what ever happens ?"

"O.K. I will marry her. I will never let her down. I will assure you."

.....

His dream ended abruptly. He could hear the chirping of the birds on the mango tree. He woke up and went out. Sumathi handed him a mango leaf to clean his teeth. He went to the bathroom to wash his face. There he found Pushpa with a mug in her hand ready to help him. Prema arranged for the breakfast. Grated coconut and jaggary mixture sandwiched between the neatly folded thin dosas. And there was aunty asking him to have more and more...!

Just before taking leave he invited them all to the 'Jumaadi[1] Koola' on the following Sunday. But he could not ask aunty to send Prema with him. Something stopped him.

Aunty then woke her husband to tell him that Shankar was about to leave. She told him about the invitation to 'Koola; and expressed her desire to attend the function and meet her sister - in - law.

Uncle, got up with sleepy eyes. He nodded to her request.

"Tell Niilakka that I will be there with my whole family on Sunday morning."

So saying he went back to sleep again. Aunty and her daughters accompanied him to the compound gate.

* * * * *

Shankar took long strides and aspired to reach the bridge as soon as possible. But it seemed like the bridge was quite far. He quickened his pace, thinking about Kusuma.

'She is a nice girl but needs a little grooming. I shall encourage her to be bold and make her modern'.... He recalled his dream and was sure that his dream would come true very soon.

He memorised the dialogues in his mind. He wanted to make the propitious moment amusing and exciting.

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1. A powerful Bhuuta of Tuluva region.

At last he reached the wooden bridge which is slanting towards west. There was low tide in the river. ..... As he stepped down from the bridge he looked at the kitchen window to behold the pretty face, but couldn't see her there . He saw quite a few ladies in the yard..

"What is the matter ?"

He questioned himself with fear and anxiety.

"Is Kamalakka ill ? She was healthy yesterday. She had even expressed her desire to eat some 'Kandige' fish."

Niilakka with a strained face quickly came up to him.

"Shankar, something unexpected has occured. Somebody has kidnapped Kusuma last night ! Kamala is still in her drunken state. She is blabering something. None of us could understand what she is trying to say."

Shankar stood petrified. His lips quivered and spectacles blurred. He was at his wits end.

Though he was heart broken for a moment he brushed away his disappointment and rose to the occassion.

"Where is Sheenanna ?"

"He went to deliver toddy to the shop. He will be here soon. He told me to tell you to wait for him, right here."

Shankar rushed to the police station and lodged a complaint in Kamalakka's name. Police came down to her house to probe the incident. She made some statements but it didnot seem like it would lead them anywhere near Kusuma. They suspected Naruva and caught him. At first the police failed to elicit the truth from him. He blurted it out only after the police used third degree punishment on him.

"The kidnappers are from Bombay. I know only two of them. There was another guy with them. On his request I went alone to Kamalakka's house at around ten O'clock. In the middle of our chat, I gave her a quarter bottle of 'brandy'. She demanded

more and so I gave another quarter bottle. When she finished it, I offered one more small bottle, but Kusuma did not let her have it. Therefore I had to convince Kusuma, that it was some kind of medicine which would make her abstain from alcohol. I insisted Kusuma to smell the same. She did so and fell unconscious. I myself didn't know what was in that bottle. So I was tensed and left the place inmediately. I am not involved in this disgraceful action..."

After a good thrashing he admitted his involvement. "They menacingly duped me. I didn't get the promised amount. You must punish the culprits." he asserted.

Shankar gave all the money he had to the sub-inspector and begged him to bring Kusuma back, before she was sold out to the brothel at Bombay.

He was cross questioned even regarding his relationship with Kusuma. Though a little reluctant Shankar boldly spoke out "She is my girl friend and I am going to marry her soon."

Sub inspector Shingane liked the dignified demeanour of a young man from the Indian Navy and promised him all possible help.

"I have high regard for you, young man. We will leave no stone unturned to trace the innocent girl. We shall definitely trap the culprits. Please don't lose heart. Just relax"

Shankar was yet skeptical about the efficiency of the Police department. He walked out the station with a heavy heart. He felt tired, he felt his strength and enthusiasm have ebbed away from him. He was badly in need of some consolation. He thought of Pereira. He ran to the post office and called him. Luckily he got him on the line !

"Pereira, some unknown men from Bombay kidnapped a girl from our village last night. They are on their way to Bombay. A complaint is lodged here, at Udupi and the Police are doing their duty. But, I feel Pereira, you are the only person, I believe who can help me get her back. She is a very innocent girl, Kusuma. She is like your Sundari to me...

"Please don't laugh Pereira. She fell a prey to those men from Bomaby. You know very well that any delay from our part could be dangerous...."

"Hello, Shankar don't be weak hearted. I will not let any opportunity slip by."

"Pereira please .. I want my Kusuma back. She shouldn't go through the same hell, Sundari did "

"I can understand your plight. I will try my best.... She should not be ruined in any way...By the by, why don't you come over here?"

"O. K. I will come. I will try to be there soon.

* * * * *

Shankar returned home tired and weather beaten... It started to rain. The smell of parched earth with rain drops reminded him of his childhood days. It was a pleasure for the kids to catch rain drops on their tongue tips and dance to the glory of nature. Childhood was full of fun and frolic and excitement. He enjoyed it to the maximum extent.

But, the incident, this day, left him in low spirits. He could not enjoy the nature. He was guilty at his negligence.

'I should have continued the detective work for some more days.' He repented.

"Every attempt of mine is going futile. I feel I am being squeezed. I should not have come from Bombay." He muttered.

By the time he reached home he was totally drenched. There he heard his mother rebuking Kamalakka.

' The most careless and unconcerned mother ! Why should she survive. It is better to tie a big piece of stone around her neck and throw her into the river. She deserves it."

She also, let a volly of curses on Naruva.

"That 'bevarsi' should be hanged "

Shankar was irritated even to hear his name.

"Why didn't I finish him off ? Just for the sake of a hundred rupees he helped the dirty demons."

He tightened his fist and counted numbers, just to relax. Then he grieved at Kusuma's fate.

'Had the kidnapers raped her ?.... Thath."

He felt he saw vultures in the sky. Growing despair, and feeling of helplessness made him cry.

He opened his empty wallet and sat there on the threshoid with a heavy heart. It was already dark. He looked at the dark sky.

Reluctantly, he asked his mother,

"Have you got any money with you ?"

"How can I save money ? You know, these days coconuts are sold at a low price. I somehow manage the daily expenses."

She continued her work. The grinding stone rumbled. She knew that her son had starved since morning and wanted to feed him as soon as possible.

There was a heavy down pour with buffeting wind, lightening and thunder the whole night ! The next morning the people were shocked to see ponds, brooks and the river full to the brim! The whole village was water logged !

"It is great to see the dried earth quench her thirst. The rainy season has indeed stepped in."

Niilakka uttered with contentment. She was busy collecting the fallen palm leaves and coconuts. Then she happened to see Dooja Nayak going his way in the middle of the field. She called out to him, and told Shankar to lower an old gunny bag kept in the attic.

Shankar did as told. Niilakka opened the sack. It contained four plates, one bowl with a handle, four tumblers, two big bowls,

a small pot - all bronze. Two of the vessels and a pot were of brass.

"Don't these belong to my father ? But, why have you got to dispose them ?"

"We don't need all these antique pieces. Your father had purchased them all when he was in good health. Later he grew ill and passed away. Teja was good enough to give all those stuff to us. My father had kept them aside, thinking it would be useful later in my life. The time has come now."

"Please don't sell it. Let it remain with us as a reminder of my father."

Shankar suggested earnestly.

"Don't be emotional, We could not save your father. Then, there is no point in keeping these vessels. Nothing can fill the void of his absence."

She said sobbing.

"What is the use worrying ? No body is eternal. We must learn to reconcile with the trials and tribulations of life. Do you know, how much suffering Lord Jesus had under gone ?"

Dooja Nayak tried to console both of them.

"Please don't sell the vessels. I can get money from my friend, Pereira."

"You know ? 'A little in one's own pocket is always better than a lot in somebody else's.' The nearby mango tree is more useful than the far off hog-plum !"

She said in a rebuking voice.

Shankar listened silently. He thought, 'My mother is adamant. She hasn't got any craze for such things. Let her act according to her wish ?"

He decided to go near the Primary school. He informed his mother and left.

Dooja Nayak weighed the vessels and quoted Rs. 200/- as the price.

"Nowadays these bronze and brass vessels have become outdated. Aluminium has replaced bronze even in the villages" he remarked.

"So what ? Bronze is more durable and has a selling price. I know you won't cheat me. I shall agree if the price is Rs.225/- I need the money without any delay."

He agreed and handed her the amount.

"Your son has come from Bombay. Then how come there is urgency for money?. Are you going to purchase any land or what?"

Niilakka laughed.

"Well, you know his father's generosity. He always helped the poor and needy. His son inherited all these qualities. He had brought enough money but emptied it all in the hospital for Aitha's son and in the Police Station for Kamala's daughter. There is nothing remain now."

"Oh ! It is quite surprising. But don't worry. God helps those who serve the needy. Money may be earned anyhow if one is lucky enough..."

Balancing the heavy bag on his head, Dooja Nayak left with contentment.

Niilakka suddenly remembered Kamala. "She might be at home alone, starving and repenting. Kusuma's absence might have broken her physically, mentally and morally. There is no one to console her. I must go."

As she got ready to leave, a boy from the 'Garodi house' came running towards her. Kalu dog got annoyed and pounced on him. Niilakka had to rush to his rescue.

The boy was in a hurry. He said, 'Kamalakka's body was floating in the pond near the Garodi. Shankaranna has been

asked to be right there. My father is waiting for him. Where is Shankaranna ?"

Niilakka was stunned. She couldn't take it.

"Where is he ? My father is waiting for him."

"Run to the school campus. He must be there."

She felt dizzy and plumped near the 'tulasi' bed ! After a while she got up and washed her face.

'Bad news travels fast.' This unexpected news set the whole village agog ! Menfolk of the village engaged in various activities with the onset of Monsoon, left their spades, pickaxe etc and hurried to Garodi. Women too left their routine work, especially twining the coir, braiding the palm leaf etc went there to see what happened ! Shankar was the first one to reach there. Niilakka too couldn't restrain herself. She felt the pinch in her heart and set forth to see the body floating on the water of the 'Garodi tank !'

She recalled all that she said against Kamala. "Why. should she survive. It is better to tie a big piece of stone around her neck and throw her into the river. She deserves. it."

She felt bad for her cruel thought. She was on the verge of tears but controlled and stood there gaping.

"What a tragedy !"

"Poor. helpless lady destined to die this way !"

"Why did she throw herself into this particular pond.? This deed of her has put all of us in great trouble !"

"Didn't she know that the water is deep near her house ?. Why then did she choose this sacred pond to commit suicide ?"

"Poor soul. She was not blessed to see her daughter's marriage"

"How could she bear the shock caused by the kidnapping of her only daughter ?"

"She didn't have concern about her daughter ! The fact is, Naruva's shop was closed yesterday. She can't live without alcohol. The thought of not getting it must have frustrated her and led her to this action."

Comments continued. But Niilakka gave a deaf ear to all the unruly tongues.

Shankar left to Udupi so as to get the Police men. The body was taken from the tank. Manjappa Gurkara announced the immediate need to dispose the body.

"We are all fasting on account of this unusual incident .... So we must think of it."

The crowd there approved his suggestion.

Poovanna of the 'Garodi house' opened the trunk and gave a bundle of Notes to meet the immediate expense. As it was a question of time and money it was decided to call the doctor to the spot, instead of carrying the body to the Government Hospital at Udupi.

Postmortum was performed inside the temporary shed made out of palm leaves. Karia the helper who came with the doctor cut open the body with his saw... Kaca kaca kacak... the rasping sound could be heard outside.

Shankar was eager and hence peeped through the palm leaf. Almost entire village stole a glance at the postmortum and felt a bit low.

Karia stepped out wearing a complacent smile on his face. He approached Shankar.

"How do you feel when you tear the body ?"

Shankar questioned with anxiety.

"It's very simple, use a very sharp and strong saw, put all your evergy and cut the bone !.... I can cut a number of bodies in a day."

He said gleefully.

"But today I have only one...!"

Shankar sensed Karia's disappointment and asked "How much do you earn a day."

"One ten rupee note for each body, which means one bottle of alcohol. Today I just got one. So only one bottle.." He smiled wryly.

"The cold blooded creature !" Shankar thought. The stinking Karia came closer to him. Then suddenly he understood his intention. He searched his shirt pocket. Luckily he found a two rupee Note which he gave Karia and had a sigh of relief.

Karia looked pleased and bowed his head with hands folded and then turned to another person. He looked impassive and jolly !

After the Postmortum was over, there arose another question, "How to dispose the body ? - to bury or cremate ?"

As burial was not the custom in their community it was decided to cremate the body.

Manjappa Gurkara raised a question,

'Where do we cremate the body ?'

A long discussion followed, as Kamala has no land of her own.

Niilakka came forward at the spur of the moment and consented to cremate the body in her field, adjacent to the river bank.

A last quesion was yet to be solved.

"What about the expenses ?"

Sheena put forward a small bundle of fresh five rupee Notes, which he took out from a small pocket in his underwear. Shankar appreciated his gesture. He knew that those new Notes were the same that he had given him for the detective work under the wooden bridge.

Enthused by Sheena's generosity, the villagers, of their own accord announced his or her contribution.

After giving a good bath to the body it was dressed and decorated. As she was taken on her last procession to the bier at the middle of the field, adjacent to the river bank the whole village was grief stricken. Shankar and Sheena set fire from below the feet and above the head. Flames quickly spread into the whole pyre. The smoke rising high up in the air....

An old lady in the gathering announced, "The smoke rose upwards. That indicates Kamala's soul has gone straight to heaven....."

"She had suffered a lot in her life. But she was lucky to have the entire village participate in her last rites."

"She must have been a pure soul. Virtue has its own reward."

The comments continued as the people dispersed from the cremation site.

After the centre of the corpse collapsed, the villagers had a good bath to cleanse themselves. They had food after that. They felt that they were eating Kamala's unsavoury food, 'Saavu ganji" as it is known.

* * * * *

....."I could save Kusuma from commiting suicide. I tried my best to prevent the kidnapping but failed..."

Why didn't I think of Kamalakka's plight ?

She sat like a 'Kule' hearing all sorts of comments ! Almost every one abused her. Nobody consoled her.

When she came out of her hang over, she would have definitely realised her daughter's fate ..... I should have kept a wary eye on her." Shankar inwardly chided himself for his carelessness.

....."What is the real reason behind her addiction to alcohol? It may be melancholy. She might have craved for the guy, whom she loved deeply. But that 'darveesi' abandoned her. In due course villagers looked down upon her and her baby. Her life was a hell of hardships. More over, she was young, how could she control the urge... She waited for him every day. She lived neither as a wife, nor a widow, nor a maid ! She ended up being an addict.

There are so many such cases in the village. A large group of women suffer from sexual starvation. Puttakka was one such example, devoid of a male companion. She used to get possessed on the Sankranthi day of every month. Men around her used to hold her tightly when she started to shiver and scream. As a small boy I was so scared to see her in that state. But now I pity her condition ....

My mother too might have had such an urge. But her hectic schedule dissuaded her from libido. Her devotion to God, her interest in social work irrespective of the expenses, her immense love for cattle, kept her busy and healthy. She had shed a lot of tears down the years and the hot sting lingered.

Every heart knows its own pain"....

Shankar pondered over why Kamalakka committed suicide... Did she come to the decision that she should not live to see her daughter as a prostitute. Was she scared or bored to live alone ?

Why did she choose that particular pond to drown herself ?

Did she think, it was the only way to get her cremation done by the villagers ?...."

Shankar recalled the dream.

....."I will give my daugher to you in marriage. You promise me that you would take care of her..."

..."Alas !... where is her daughter ?"....

He felt the pain in the heart. He couldn't think of her fate in the brothel..

He got up from the bed frustrated. It was still dark. He walked to and fro in the outer yard like a man in a trance, shattered and crushed between worries and helplessness.

The stars slowly disappeared. The sky appeared aglow. He tried to enjoy the rising sun and blooming flowers.

Kalu started barking. Aitha had come. He seemed to have shrunk in size and looked frail. He was carrying a big cock under his arms. The proud cock seemed to be enjoying the ride.

Shankar felt uneasy at his arrival. ..."What do I do if he asks for money ? There is hardly any in my wallet."....

Folding his arms Aitha said,

"Today I am supposed to do the last rites of my son. My people would attend the function. I have got to spend some money on food and toddy..... I'll put this cock in the coop...."

Niilakka came out.

Unable to controle his surging grief Aitha cried for a while. Niilakka consoled him and arranged for the money he needed. Then she said, "Take your cock with you. Shankar doesn't like to have chicken these days."

Aitha was reluctant. He stood there in silence. His grief swelled up. Slowly he moved on with his eyes moist. But the cock seemed happy as it was being carried back in it's owner's arms ! It screeched in a amusing voice pek-pek-pek...

Shankar recalled his dream again.

"I won't leave Kusuma. I will look after her..."

The promise made to Kamalakka in his dream kept haunting him.

....."How do I keep the promise ? Now it is all over".....

No it is not. I must get back my Kusuma. And that, I must, at any cost"....

He made up his mind to go to Bombay.

"Is it possible to lend me some money. I have got to do some urgent errand at Bombay. I have to get the ticket. I will be back within a fortnight..."

He asked his mother.

"Oh ! Yes. I got Rs. 225/- from Dooja Nayak. You can use that for your expenses."

Niilakka handed the whole amount to him. She pestered him to eat a plateful of pounded rice mixed with jaggary and grated coconut, before he left to Udupi to buy the ticket.

As he passed through the bridge he couldn't dare to look at the empty kitchen window of Kamalakka's house. But her dog cried in agony, the howling sound znooy...iee..... irritated him.

He returned home with the bus ticket and a woollen blanket. for his mother. As he gave the blanket to her, he reported the plight of Kamalakka's dog.

"Let it starve and die.... Listen, a meeting is proposed to be held at the Garodi.. You have to go now;" Niilakka ordered.

Shankar hurried to the Garodi. He saw Manjappa Gurkar, surrounded by a few men. The meeting had not commenced yet. They were waiting for the rest of the villagers to join them. Mean while they chit chatted.

"Pijina, isn't it strange that there should be flood during the month of 'Kaarthel' and not in 'Aati' or 'Soṇa' ? The river is in spate due to relentless rain at the Western Ghats. Anyway Kamala was blessed as there was not even a rain drop till her cremation was over."

"Fluctuation in seasons and natural calamities occur for some definite reason. Insincere people have to get their due punishment. So the creator of this world, likes to play this way" Pijina's comment was vague,

"This early shed of heavy rain has left the farmers tied up. How can we cultivate without paddy seedlings. There is a lurking fear of flood in the beginning itself. Seems like we all have to starve.."

"Yes all these symbolises Kaliyuga. What do you say ?

"I wonder why did she ever die here in this Garodi tank. She could have easily jumped into the river. A mystery to all minds.."'

"Don't strain yourself seeking a reason.... Let us chalkout a solution. The pond has to be purified. That is very urgent and important." The estimated expenditure for the ritual is beyond our reach. Something must be done."

"Let us open the 'Kanike dabba.' For the past two years it has not been opened. It is likely that it is full."

Gurkar Manjappa's authoritative suggestion got the endorsement of the group, which now become a large crowd. Everybody liked the idea of using the 'Kaṇike' fund for the purpose, than bothering the poor for donation.

"Purification of the pond comes under the development project. So the fund can be utilised for the same. After the purification ritual, we have to conduct 'Agelu seeve[1] ' following which 'darsana of Baiderlu[2] has to be performed. A date has to be fixed for 'Jumaadi Koola' only after that.

Everybody noded their head to Gurukar's opinion. But Poovanna from the Garodi house tried to discourage the plan of opening the 'Kaaṇike ḍabba'[3]

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1. A kind of ritual worship at Garodi.
2. Invoking spirits of Koti-Chennaya
3. A box with a hole in the lid, kept in temples for receiving offerings.

"There is only a meagre amount in the box. It will not be sufficient. It is better that we collect money from the people."

"Let us open it and see, so as to estimate how much more is required. Only then can we ask for donation. No one shall object."

Most of the elders supported the opinion of Gurkara. But Poovanna was restless and looked doleful.

The meeting continued for a long time and a large group gathered around. Shankar sat there listening to all conversation, argrument, suggestion etc in the meeting but didnot bother to show any interest as he had no belief in any such rituals. Yet he had a satisfaction that all of them came forward to perform the last rites of Kamalakka, the bojja ceremony, in a befitting manner. The elders decided to use a portion of money from the 'Kaanike dabba' for this purpose too.

"May be Kamala, who had nothing and nobody to support had wished that her last rites be done. And so it shall be done."

Every body agreed.

Shankar returned home and sat beside his mother. They spoke about the incident and the purpose of the meeting. Niilakka was satisfied with the resolution of the meeting.

Amidst the conversation he remembered Kusuma and suddenly he started searching some thing. Finally he found it in a pocket in one of his pants.. a small bundle of Rs. Hundred !

He had a brain wave. He told his mother, he would be back soon and he left.

"It is already getting dark. Don't be late."

Niilakka said. She never asked, "where are you going at this hour ?" That was good.

On the way to Garodi, he kept thinking of his mother. He felt, he shouldn't leave her alone in the village. "If something happened to her who will take care of her. As a Naval cadet, I had a commitment to serve my mother land. But in doing so I

should not neglect my mother .... I should see that she will be safe and fine."

He silently prayed for her good health.

"In my absence, who could be a help to her ?" Shankar pondered...

"I should get you back ....Kusuma, I should ..." He muttered.

When he stepped on to the inner yard of the Garodi, he could see a dimlight inside the shrine. The door was closed. He came towards the 'Baakila bobbarya 'statue at the door and peeped through the window. He was shocked to see a boy from the Garodi house trying to take some money out from the 'Kaanike dabba' He was inserting a thin broom stick.

"Aey! you young boy !.... theft ! How dare you to do this ? !"

The boy stood speechless.... He was caught redhanded, had nothing to say in his defence ! So he fell at Shankar's feet pleading for mercy !

"I will never repeat this, "dammaya"[1]

"If you flick anything from the box, I will see that you will be taken to the Police."

Holding Shankar's feet, the boy began to cry...

Shankar somehow forced him to put the money back into the box. The boy admitted that he had attempted stealing more than once.

"Trekking the road of evil can never lead you to true happiness. You should understand this."

"I'll never do this again... Please forgive me."

.....

.....

Shankar put the small bundle of Rs. hundred into the 'Kaanike dabba'. His heart felt light.

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1. An humble mode of entreaty craving mercy.

Kusuma's money would be used for her mother's last rites...

He had a unique feeling of relief !

On his way back, he could hear the sound of 'doolu' from Aitha's house.

..."Aitha atleast has a 'doolu'. He can play it when ever he feels like. It takes away all fear and grief..."

Niilakka was waiting patiently for him at the door. He wanted to reveal to her about the robbery attempt at the Garodi, but contained himself. He knew that if he did, his mother would start off her philosophy .... "Every one on earth has to suffer according to his or her 'Karma".[1]

"Shankar, my son, go and have your bath in the bath room. . I have kept warm water ready for you. Don't take cold water shower from the well today. You have to leave for Bombay, tomorrow.."

Shankar did not want to hurt her. As he entered the bathroom, he heard a whimpering voice. It was a dog sleeping on a gunny bag. "...Oh ! that's Kamalakka's dog !" It starved but it didn't show any interest in food. The rice and curry which, Niilakka had given it, was untouched ! The dog appeared as if he too no longer wanted to live. He missed both Kamalakka and Kusuma.

"I have cooked 'Koyyoludaḍḍe' a special dish prepared from rice, cockle and masala combined. I know you'll like it." She said with concern and was happy to serve her son.

But he ate only a handful and went to bed. His thoughts lingered.

"Will Pereira succeed in rescuing Kusuma ? Will the Police strive to nab the culprits ?"

He could not come out of the vicious circle. All the events that happened in the village after his arrival, all the hopes and disappointments, gaiety and sadness kept him awake all through the night.

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1. An act performed in a previous life which is responsible for joy and sorrow in the present life

The next day he kept the leather bag aside for Sheenanna. He handed over shirts and a five rupee Note to Niilakka to give it to Govindajja.

When he was getting ready to leave, Niilakka lighted a lamp in front of 'tulasi bed' and prostrated before it and prayed for his safe journey. He touched her feet and saught her blessings.

Kaalu too was restless. Then he started barking aloud !

Aitha and his daughter Appi had come !

"We have decided to leave this village for good. We will settle at Nejar with our own people. He my son has snapped off his ties with us and here we are left with nothing but grief. His memories is haunting us. We have lost him for ever. So we think our 'runa'[1], with this village has also come to an end."

Aitha burst into tears unable to supress the sorrow welling up within him. Appi broke up next. Niilakka put some oil on Appi' s unkempt hair and sobbed quietly.

Shankar, watching all this, melted but controlled himself. It was all so sad. But it was getting late. He could not stay there any longer.

"I shall see you all soon".... he started off with his journey....

Kaalu followed him. Shankar tried to 'Shoo' it away

"Go back... Kaalu, don't follow me....."

He wouldn't listen. He followed his master like a faithful servant.

Shankar was faced with a challenge now. He had to send Kaalu back to his mother.

"How ?" Perhaps this made him forget his sorrows for a while !

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1. relationship

M. Janaki Brahmavara, is a known writer in Tulu and Kannada languages. She is the author of 'Kambala' (Kannada Poetry 1993), Kuḍuruḍa Keeḍage (Tulu Novel 1994), 'Tirgaataḍa Tirl' (Tulu Travelogue 1996), 'Kappu Gidi' (Tulu Novel 1998) 'Tirugataḍa Tirulu' (Kannada Travelogue 1999), Yugamagurnaga (Tulu Novel 2000). She has also been the recipient of many awards - Paniyadi Tulu Novel Award in 1994 for Kuḍuruḍa Keeḍage, Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy Award for the same Novel in 1995, for 'Tirgaataḍa Tirl' in 1996, for Yugamagurnaga in 2002 and Dakshina Kannada Jilla Makkala Sahitya Sangama Award for 'Tirugataḍa Tirulu' in 1999. Her Tulu Novel 'Kappu Gidi' has been serialised under 'Sahitya Siri Ḍompa' programme of Mangalore Akaashavani with wide appriciation. She was the member of Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy for the period 1998-2000.

She is having good experience in creative writing. She proved herself to be the best as well as qualitative writer. Her works mainly represent the coastal life, indigenous culture and literary intellectuality.